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Coin cabinet, Japan, ca. 1670-1690 (detail FIGS.119 and 120).

Finch, China, Guangzhou (Canton), Qing dynasty, European drawing based on a Chinese model, ca. 1770, pencil and watercolour, white highlight on Japanese paper; 34 x 27 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.618-12).

Jean Jansson, Novus Atlas sive Theatrum orbis terranum in quo tabulae & descriptiones omnium regionum totius universi accuratissime exhibentur in quatuor tomos distinctus, vol. I, fol. 7-8, Amsterdam, 1647; burin etched and watercoloured, 37.8 x 54.5 cm (unframed); former collection of the Bibliothèque Saint Michel d'Anvers, 1650; Robien's former library (no. 1650 of the 1749 inventory); Bibliothèque municipal de Saint-Brieuc (Rés G711).

Jean Jansson, Novus Atlas sive Theatrum orbis terranum in quo Hispaniae, Italiae, Asiae, Africae nec-non Americae, tabulae & descriptiones luculentissima, vol. III, Italia, Liguria Seu Status Reipubl. Genuensis, Dd, Amsterdam, 1647; burin etched and watercoloured, 38.1 x 49.6 cm (unframed); former collection of the Bibliothèque Saint Michel d'Anvers, 1650; Robien's former library (no. 1650 of the 1749 inventory); Bibliothèque municipal de Saint-Brieuc (Rés G713).

# MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD

The Eighteenth-Century Cabinet of Curiosities of Christophe-Paul de Robien

## For Louis André, 2019 † and in memory of Gaëtan Goudy, 2018 †

# MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD

The Eighteenth-Century Cabinet of Curiosities of Christophe-Paul de Robien





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## PREFACE

Nathalie Appéré

Robien's cabinet of curiosities, and the eight thousand or so objects that it contains, make the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes a unique institution that has the immense advantage of now conserving as many art collections as ethnographic collections.

Nostalgia for the passage of time, an understanding of the inexorable advance of history, a sense of the fleeting nature of time, an obsession with saving the illustrious vestiges of a bygone era from ruin... Robien's collection attests to a personality that was becoming aware of the major civilisational changes occurring in the eighteenth century. It singularly echoes the social, environmental, and democratic transitions that our world is set to experience today.

Thanks are due to the successive curators of the Musée des beaux-arts since its inception in the 1970s and to the researchers who present us here with their vision and analysis.

We would like to wish a very pleasant visit to one and all.

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FIG.1 Jean Jansson, Novus Atlas sive Theatrum orbis terranum in quo tabulae & descriptiones omnium regionum totius universi accuratissime exhibentur in quatuor tomos distinctus, vol. I, fol. 7–8, watercolour etching, 37.8 x 54.5 cm (unframed), Amsterdam, 1647; former collection of the Bibliothèque Saint Michel d'Anvers, 1650; Robien's former library (no.1650 from the 1749 inventory); Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc (Rés G71¹).

FIG.2 Long-tailed Glossy Starling, China, Guangzhou (Canton), Qing dynasty, European drawing based on a Chinese model, ca. 1770, pencil and watercolour, white highlight on Japanese paper; 34 x 27 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.618-21).

**FIG.3** Oriole, China, Guangzhou (Canton), Qing dynasty, European drawing based on a Chinese model, ca. 1770, pencil and watercolour, white highlight on Japanese paper; 34 x 27 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.618-<sup>24</sup>).

# MI ICÉE DES BEALIX. A BTS DE BENINES . LANVIER 2021

# FROM CABINETS TO MUSEUMS, THE SAME CURIOUS APPROACH

Emmanuel Kasarhérou

This statement will seem superfluous to those familiar with the Musée des beauxarts de Rennes, who know that the institution's remarkable collection, primarily extra-European, owes so much to the undertakings and passion of the Marquis de Robien (1698–1756). For all that, it is worthwhile reiterating that many contemporary museum establishments, some quite prominent and others more discreet are the result of along process of sedimentation for which the primary resource was often a cabinet of curiosities.

This is true of the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, whose early American collection, of considerable value and rich diversity, comes from the cabinet built up over the second half of the eighteenth century by the Marquis de Sérent (1736–1822). A little later, in the early nineteenth century, Paris saw a significant collection begin to form, as thousands of artefacts, minerals, and specimens, mostly collected in the South Seas, were brought together by painter Alexandre Isidore Leroy de Barde (1777–1828). This outstanding ensemble was the seed of the fine Oceanic collections that can today be admired at the Musée de Boulogne-sur-Mer.

Clearly, the cabinet is an ancient tradition traversing the ages that continued into the twentieth century – think of André Breton (1896–1966) and the "wall" in his studio – and that carries on even today in the eclecticism of certain individual collections. This longevity can be explained through the timelessness of its driving force: at the very origin of the cabinet we find... curiosity! A curiosity that encourages us to reach towards the incomprehensible, the strange, the desirable, or even the repugnant. A curiosity that in its efforts at selection, confrontation, and assemblage becomes one with science, sharing the intellectual activities required for comparing, classifying, and producing a discourse.

Collection is never gratuitous. It emerges from an at times rather obscurely formulated intention and a desire to distinguish and discriminate between what surrounds us – the near and the far – and between what merits being collected. Discarding that object, keeping this one, in a slow and patient ballet.

The process delineates quite clearly the museographic practices of today. In a curator's relationship with collection and the desire to enhance and delve deeper, this inclination is, at heart, scarcely different: choosing one relevant piece from amongst a multitude of possibilities and thus completing an ensemble. Unlike the knowledgeable enthusiast, the role of the professional is to explain his or her choices, inscribing them in a discourse that is both scientifically and aesthetically justified. But when it comes down to it, does not curiosity remain the driving force behind this commitment?

And beyond that, is this not the same for museum visitors, eager for knowledge, discovery, and emotion?

Within these elements lies the true value of a collection: the possibility for exchange. If in the taste for assemblage we were to only see the expression of personal desire, we would be missing the most important – the curiosity evoked by these pieces instead traces the outline of an open territory to be shared. Now that is an exchange!

With this, we can better understand that the works that constitute these cabinets of curiosities, most often old, survivors of a tumultuous history, should today be seen as sensitive and eloquent witnesses of cultures, history, and worlds perhaps gone but still present in our minds. Because these objects, plucked one by one by the vagaries of time and chance have not always been part of the microcosmic ensemble that is their world today.

And so it becomes our duty, whether we be an amateur, a scientist, a collector, or an artist, to regularly question these curiosities in the light of our own, inevitably evolving investigations. This is what brings a collection to life, right into the most hidden corners of a building where the gaze imagines settling on heavily slumbering formations. The impression is misleading, of course, as so much remains to be discovered, read, and interpreted, in order to reposition these works in their historical context, to understand their provenance and trajectories, and ultimately, to see them as they have never been seen before, centuries after their first presentation.





Wenn wir die Menschen nur nehmen, wie sie sind, so machen wir sie schlechter; wenn wir sie behandeln, als wären sie, was sie sein sollten, so bringen wir sie dahin, wohin sie zu bringen sind.

> When we take people merely as they are, we make them worse; when we treat them as if they were what they should be, we improve them as far as they can be improved.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship,1795-1796

#### Erinnerung

Willst du immer weiters chweifen?
Sieh, das Gute liegt so nah.
Lerne nur das Glück ergreifen:
Denn das Glück ist immer da.

#### Recollection

You wish to roam forever? See how good lies so near. Learn to embrace happiness, and it will always be there.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Gedichte: Ausgabe letzter Hand, 1827

FIG.4 Jean Jansson, Novus Atlas sive Theatrum orbis terranum in quo Hispaniae, Italiae, Asiae, Africae nec-non Americae, tabulae & descriptiones luculentissima, vol. III, detail from Archipelago de St. Lazaro, Insularum Molucarum (nova descriptio), Amsterdam, 1647; burin etched and watercoloured, 38.1 x 49.6 cm (unframed); former collection of the Bibliothèque Saint Michel d'Anvers, 1650; Robien's former library (no. 1650 of the 1749 inventory); Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc (Rés G71³).

'If one day I had to constitute a collection, it would contain objects, oddities, things whose origins are unknown and that, once placed side by side, take on meaning because the person who took them away from there gave them one.'

The cabinet of curiosities belongs to those rare media, like the panorama, the museum, cinema, or television, that at a certain time in their history made us believe they could deliver the exact reflection of the entire world. Their common denominator is that they are tools for the restitution of reality, representational supports, microcosms. This ability to materialise a condensed form of reality that it embraces in its complexity and gigantism, this two-fold movement of absorption of the world and restitution explains the intimate bond between these mediums and the modes of representation (scientific, artistic, social, etc.) that are contemporary to them. They allow us to understand the forms of competition, heritage, or continuity that can exist between them. Thus the invention of cinema corresponds chronologically to the period in which the flourishing economy of panoramas set the pace; television, early in its history, might have been perceived as a potential threat for film, and the museum is often considered the modern form of the ancestral cabinet of curiosities.

However, certain panoramas have been restored or revived in recent decades, television never eradicated cinema, and as for the cabinet of curiosities, it has experienced a great revival of interest since the end of the twentieth century. The fact that museums piously explore the history and heritage dimensions of their collections is abundantly clear. But that they call on the model (or myth) of the cabinet of curiosities in their museographic compositions, scenographies, catalogues, or scientific message can give us more pause for thought. And if we look closer, it is artists who, as is often the case, have surpassed them in this movement.

**1** MRÉJEN, 2014.

It is therefore interesting to return to the sources of this current infatuation for cabinets of curiosities - or for the fantasies they elicit. We can thus observe the way in which the world of modern art was able to appropriate some of their characteristics, since at least the mid-twentieth century, the signals that bear witness to the transition from the museum designed as a place of knowledge to the museum as a place of experience. the signs of the reemergence of individuality in the understanding of museum works. If we believe, like Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), that the work of art does not exist as an isolated object but in an interrelation between its creator, the beholder, and an entire complex network that brings them into contact, then we are all the more inclined to pay attention to everything surrounding the work of art: not just the other artworks presented nearby but also the scenographic elements adjacent to them, and above all the way in which the ensemble is arranged within the space to create meaning. The central room of the International Surrealist Exhibition, devised by Marcel Duchamp, at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1938, summarises in itself a multitude of artistic experiences that highlight notions of installation, environment, and interdependency between assembled objects, a given space, and the spectators invited to enter it.3 Alongside the development of the white cube, promoting an aesthetic of the individual and isolated artwork,4 there thus exists another trend whereby objects do not exist independently but in relation to a whole, thanks to the drivers of accumulation, collection, and the meaning that they attract simply by being a part of a whole. This propensity for installations to come together in a vast ensemble paradoxically enhances both the singularity of each object and its juxtaposition with other pieces. It highlights the author of the assembly in a way that is equally important as the authors of each of the objects considered individually. It encompasses within a single movement the object, its collection, its membership within a limitless whole, the search for its meaning, spatialisation, discoverer, and its way of interpellating the spectator. This inclination for installation and accumulation in modern and contemporary art thus undertakes, of course, an initial potential comparison with the aesthetic of the cabinet of curiosities.

Other, closely related aspirations variously unfold in what has been called 'the art of assemblage', 'montage in the arts', or 'the contact aesthetic'. All of these underline the importance in modern and contemporary art of the collage and of juxtaposition, of connections woven between objects, of the consideration of the empty space around each element, of the comical or surprising aspects of random encounters between materials stemming from various worlds... This ability art has to construct, juxtapose, assemble, connect, bind, correlate, suggest, and so on, through the simple connection of fragments of reality presented to the gaze in a certain, established order must also be associated with the very fundaments of what defines an exhibition. The manifest dimension or critique of the curatorial gaze has therefore been highlighted and analysed numerous times. This two-fold contemporary familiarity with 'the art of the assemblage' and 'the art of the exhibition' thus also prepares today's visitors for these two practices, which are also intimate characteristics of the cabinet of curiosities.

<sup>2</sup> See BOUILLER, 2015.

**<sup>3</sup>** KLÜSER, 1998, notably pp. 173–186.

<sup>4</sup> The white cube must not, however, be caricatured. It may naturally be considered a way of shielding the independence of the object-in-itself (for this part of modernity that could be summed up as the belief in the omnipotence of the artwork-object), but it may also be the site of an attention brought to bear on the staging, on the space that places the spectator and the work into relation through a shared aesthetic and criteria.

**<sup>5</sup>** See KLÜSER, 1998 and PUGNET, 2010 in particular.

<sup>6</sup> See SEITZ, 1961; LEVAILLANT, 2011; COËLLIER, 2005; COËLLIER, 2008.

The art of installation, assemblage, and exhibition possibly experienced a kind of climax in the 1970s, at the time when different kinds of museums and heritage sites (in the fields of archaeology, historic monuments, ethnology, or contemporary art) were trying to bring entire swathes of reality into the exhibition spaces, with scientific concerns for objectivity, staging, and the integration of the viewer all combined. Faithful to real life, an experimental and emotional dimension for the visitor, and a conviction that reality will always be stronger than fiction characterises these 'period rooms', 'environments', or installations that give new life to the diorama of the previous century. We can at once easily imagine that these museographic presentations of the 1970s are based on an anamnesis of bygone museum forms and that they prepare the terrain for the revival in interest in the following decades for archaic forms of media that had heretofore been deemed old hat: panoramas, dioramas, cabinets of curiosities, and so on.

These decades of the late twentieth century were also marked by the museum's transition from the locus of knowledge to the museum as the locus of experience. While museums were mainly considered, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as sites of learning, several phenomena combined to distance them partly from this mission of pure transmission of knowledges: the evolution of the sciences themselves. often increasingly independent with respect to specimen collections; the democratisation of tertiary study; the popularisation of didactic publications, and the possibility (at increasingly lower cost) to reproduce numerous colour plates; the development of databases and the simplification of their accessibility, particularly thanks to the Internet... Knowledge is now transmitted most often elsewhere than in the museum, whereas teaching in disciplines such as geology, archaeology, or art history had up until now been more dependent on physical collections. In addition, in most cases, the scientific research underway had become too complex, abstract, or specialised to be considered solely within the museum framework. Finally, the calling into question of scientific models of universal scope (for instance, related to a rise in relativisms, to the development of postcolonial studies, or to the questioning inherent to each discipline) had irreversible impact on the medium, which had been one of the instruments of predilection of universalist positivism. So people no longer went to museums to receive the unction of a unique and descendant knowledge, but instead to be confronted by a multitude of 'witnesses' (evidence), intuitions, sensations, theories, and question marks. Clearly, we still need access to the unica conserved in museums, but strict pedagogy is no longer the institution's primary mission. Most visitors now go to museums looking for snippets of knowledge, granted; but also representations of the world, the privileged contact with artworks, a special atmosphere, a kind of exoticism, a hub of sociability... These moments spent in exhibitions bring together experiences with rare objects, outside of time and daily life, whose singularity we seek out.

These experiences are easier if they are introduced via the prism of an individual gaze. This might be that of a mediator, an artist, an art historian, or an enthusiastic collector. This point of view allows the accent to be placed on such or such a detail that helps a work of art, an ensemble, or an object to be understood, whose intimidating authority cracks once we can latch onto a familiar notion. This mode of exchange inherent to the world of museums, founded on individual experience and shared gazes, highlights the importance of the narration in most mediation systems. It also highlights the impor-

7 See BOUILLER, 2017.

tance of the anecdotal, trivial, and accidental, through opposition to the objective but cold vision of pure scientific discourse. This prism of the individual gaze enables the role given to contemporary artists in museums to be explained, whatever it may be (and not just contemporary art). This same prism allows us to understand the revival in interest in cabinets of curiosities. We perceive in this the element of madness behind the composer of the collection. We prefer today those who seek, probe, observe, and doubt the unsettling authority of the scholar who considers that a monolithic knowledge is worthy.

It is into this context that we must restore the constitution of a contemporary art collection in the Oiron Castle, by Jean-Hubert Martin, from 1991 onwards. The installation Le cabinet de Claude Gouffier by Guillaume Bijl, created in 1995, constitutes one of the highlights of the connection maintained in this place between artworks created in situ and the spirit of the cabinet of curiosities. The reopening of the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, in Paris, in 2007, under the aegis of Claude d'Anthenaise, also resolutely expresses the desire to run counter to the traditional academicism of the museum by offering 'the old-fashioned taste for cabinets of curiosities'. In 2019. Laurent Le Bon and Patrick Mauriès, with the exhibition Cabinets de curiosités at the Fonds Hélène & Édouard Leclerc in Landerneau, cast a retrospective gaze over the 'beholders who will have reinvented, in recent decades, the concept of the cabinet of curiosities. The only possibility, for these curators, of bringing these various recent experiences into historical perspective would be to attest to the movement that they describe. Finally, several art historians are starting to report the same diagnosis by bringing together artworks and contemporary art exhibitions in which cabinets and curiosities are once again combined. Among them, Aurélie Michel and Alexander Streitberger accord particular attention to artists such as Mark Dion, Thomas Hirschhorn, or to a 'trend hunter' like Li Edelkoort, all of whom are perceived - through their practices as assemblers of disparate materials - as symbols of what makes the essence of our contemporary world. 11

Far from being old-fashioned, 'has-been', or out of date, the cabinet of curiosities is therefore extremely current... There is nothing surprising about this: like the diorama, the panorama, or the museum, its ability to encompass the macrocosm and summarise it within a microcosm responds to our desire to understand and supervise the cosmos. A contrario, its way of expressing the world through a subjective and oriented gaze corresponds aptly to the contemporary rejection of ideologies, authorities, and positivism. Its suitability, not at hammering home its pedagogical project, but at leading visitors through it gently by the hand, obliges us to retrace the path of understanding by ourselves, and its availability for the construction of narratives is rather well aligned with the contemporary aspiration for narrative, the picturesque, fiction, and participatory modes of transmission. Its material reality and authenticity constitute a true antidote to the virtual. Finally, it is a place. A place inhabited by thought and opening onto the vast world. A place to share through experience. Like the study of Saint Augustin (ca. 1503) by Vittore Carpaccio (1465–1526), it is 'the success of a thinking house'. 12

<sup>8</sup> See BAWIN, 2014; BOUILLER, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> MARTIN, 2000.

**<sup>10</sup>** CARPENTIER, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> MICHEL, 2016; STREITBERGER, 2019.

**<sup>12</sup>** GOETZ, 2011, p. 42.

# **EXORDIUM**

The publication of the first volume of the catalogue of the Robien collections meets many requirements, but does not fulfil them all, far from it. While I deemed it vital to introduce this volume with a series of general essays to facilitate understanding of this priceless collection, there was always going to be a risk that some elements could not be covered, and today I can only deeply regret the absence of a contribution that would have provided one of the essential keys for understanding: the in-depth study of his library. I am not alone in my heartfelt desire that in the not too distant future this task should be completed and bring us unexpected details on many elements that remain unclear, because Christophe-Paul de Robien (1698–1756) was clearly a true bibliophile.

As for the catalogue section of this opus, after seventeen years of extensive and varied research, as well as investigations picking up on those of our predecessors (in particular François Bergot and Jean-Yves Veillard), it seemed necessary to now share these discoveries, as the objects have been physically accessible to visitors since the inauguration of the cabinet of curiosities at the Musée des beaux-arts on 20 May 2012. It would have been straightforward to begin with the publication of the Western sections devoted to the fine arts: files relating to those works have been contributed to regularly for over a generation, and I would have been able to call on colleagues at major museums in Paris to compile an outstanding catalogue raisonné in only a few months

However, our current globalised world, whose very origins are visible within our cabinet of curiosities, encouraged me to instead turn towards objects from other, more exotic and mysterious civilisations for this first section, which is to be followed by two or even three other volumes over the coming years. This decision not only brought together researchers from diverse cultural backgrounds, from American and Chinese to French and Hispanic, but this multiple focalisation also better conveys the complexity of Robien's personality; in short, assembling different points of view (which was one of the approaches of the Annales school) was the most suitable approach for bringing further nuance to our understanding of the collector. This is why the reader should not be surprised to find varying portrayals of Robien, which, in a paradoxical way, might almost seem to contradict one another. The great sensitivity of the authors, their scientific training, and their specific cultural backgrounds do much to explain this. It

FIG.5 Seed-eating Passerine, China, Guangzhou (Canton), Qing dynasty, European drawing based on a Chinese model, ca. 1770, pencil and watercolour, white highlight on Japanese paper; 34 x 27 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.618-42).

was also a deliberate choice to solicit a subjective involvement from the contributing authors, implying a personal affirmation and emphasising nuanced views on Robien, so as to clearly convey the idea that science is not developed through a selection of transcendental laws, or worse still, that it is carried out through a few methodological rituals, but is instead embodied and advances through the writing of those who set in motion a process of careful thought originating from biographical study.

Furthermore, in order to avoid tiring the reader, I decided to complete the publication by putting much of the object information online. The value of the Internet in terms of convenient access and for the advantageous lightening of the catalogue largely justified a publication focusing on the most significant elements in the collection, thus accommodating the curiosity of a reader who may wish to find out more and refer to the museum's website.

Finally, as many magazines today promote the idea of the cabinet of curiosities for contemporary interior decoration, I believe it crucial here to attempt to give a brief definition of what it is and what it is not – at least under the Ancien Régime.

The cabinet of curiosities is a personal arrangement of objects with no apparent connection, that appears at a precise moment in Western history, whose aim is to recast an initiation into understanding, and whose analogue form has no other meaning than the subjective link given by the collector. Arousing emotion as well as cognition, it enables an aestheticised contemplation of one step in the process of speculative thought that occurred during moments of paradigmatic change, namely during and after the 'revolutions' that took place from the fifteenth until the mid-eighteenth century, when new and profound disruptions occurred in the West and sounded the death knell of a certain type of cabinet. How to deal with the sudden arrival of new forms of knowledge? How to give coherence to them? How to retain meaning when a multitude of innovations enter into conflict with former knowledge and those that hold it? These are just some of the issues that lie at the heart of the cabinet. Its form but also its praxis appear as a vade mecum that enables experimentation and a way of experiencing the objects creatively, even playfully. Unexpected comparisons set out avenues for interpretation, appearing as a kind of hypothesis formulated within the context of a massive upheaval in references and certainty. It is at once, and sometimes paradoxically, humanist (centred on humankind), speculative (an analogue imagination is required), personal (the collector must present it because it is too varied to immediately convey meaning), and 'processual' (it allows for an association of ideas before reaching a conclusion), combining both the marvellous and the scholarly to provide a perspective that gradually reveals itself to be a formidably effective method of teaching.

Initially, it barely differed from its parent collectionism, in evidence since ancient times and also present during the Middle Ages. In the fifteenth century, it was clearly marked by a gentes element of accumulation where exoticism was systematically present: like treasure as an indication of power, early cabinet collections revealed, for the nobles that assembled them, an aptitude for public sovereignty sometimes frustrated by a lack of official functions.¹ Throughout the sixteenth century, the first wave of colonial expansion enabled kings to proclaim both their supremacy and their knowledge, made material by wealth brought back from unknown lands. At the same

time, an assortment of humanist scholars, apothecaries, and doctors, but also artists and booksellers, directed their libido sciendi towards objects that served both as proof and means for study. Later, in the seventeenth century, a true hybridisation came to fulfilment in these aesthetic and scholarly orientations. This was to be the golden age of the cabinet of curiosities, which spread across all of Europe. France, the United Provinces, Portugal, and Spain, who were attempting to divide the world amongst themselves, brought back to Europe a huge quantity of new objects that gave much food for thought. Finally, following as it did in the footsteps of Descartes (1596–1650). Spinoza (1632–1677), Mabillon (1632–1707), Van Reede (1636–1691), and many others, all enamoured with a method that was only moderately effective at bringing order to knowledge and turning it into an instrument that permitted humankind to tear itself away from its condition as a creature submissive to the caprices of nature and destiny, the eighteenth century fanned the flames of a protocol that, through its taxonomist, hierarchical, and universal approach, radically reclassified polymathic cabinets: little by little, the collections became specialised. However (and Robien was not the only representative), some collectors used the modalities of the cabinet, which had proven its worth, as a real tool for objectivity, to preserve and share the traces of a past that was truly bygone, and to physically remake history, a tool characterised as much by individual nostalgia for passing time as by a feverish quest for meaning that thwarts melancholy. And so it is not by chance that Lachlan Macquarie (1762–1824), governor of New South Wales in Australia, used the apparatus of the cabinet of curiosities to try and understand the new world that surrounded him in all its dimensions, both natural and human.

The cabinet of curiosities, in its historical sense and such as I have just outlined, is therefore not strictly speaking a Treasure, like those of the Athenians in Delphi, the Shōsō-in in Japan, or Western churches, in which there is little continuity in meaning, nor is it like a delicately chaotic artist's studio, or a stand at the greatest art fair in the world, where the most incredible objects issuing from human ingenuity rub shoulders with natural wonders. Nor is it akin to your chest of drawers or bedside table on which a savant negligence might have placed all sorts of congruous and incongruous objects! It shares with these, however, the profound poetry of disorder that promises only to manifest its presence, and the hope aroused by an initiatory emotion to accomplish a search for the self, whose material form, like the *memento mori*, calls to mind a sense of urgency and an unsurpassable horizon.

1 FALGUIÈRES, 1988.

24 MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD - EXORDIUM - François Coulon

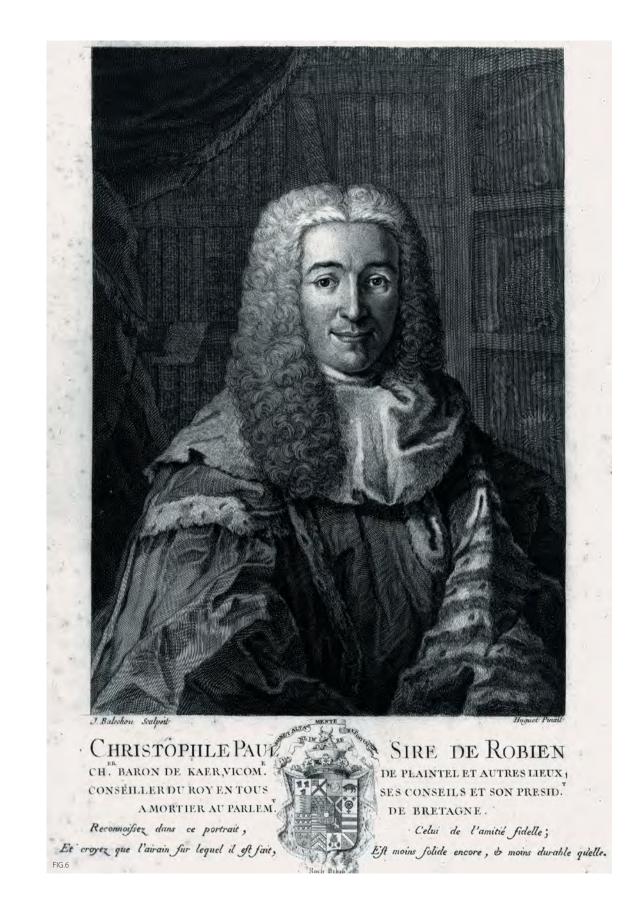
# A START IN LIFE

FIG.6 Jean-Joseph Balechou, after a drawing by Jean-François Huguet, *Le président de Robien dans son cabinet*, etching, 51.5 x 38.5 cm, the Musée de Bretagne – Les Champs Libres Collection, Rennes – Métropole (873.0001.1).

This title, which I borrow from a wild novel by Balzac (1799–1850), strikes me as appropriate for describing the emergence from oblivion that Christophe-Paul de Robien (1698–1756) spectacularly attained in 1972. The conditions of renaissance of a man who had vanished for 250 years and the characteristics by which he is introduced in the present day will provide the theme for this semblance of an introduction to life beyond the grave.

The grandson of an advisor, son, son-in-law, step-father, father of the early presidents of the Parliament of Brittany, himself vested with this high office; the one that his descendants referred to as 'the Great President' – born in the twilight years of the reign of Louis XIV, in 1698, and deceased before the setbacks of the reign of Louis XV, in 1756 – spent his whole life in Rennes, in the Age of Enlightenment, in the best of worlds. We make his acquaintance with an etching by Jean-Joseph Balechou (1715–1764), based on a pastel drawing by Rennes-based painter Jean-François Huguet (1679–1749), at his hôtel particulier, standing, facing us, dressed in the presidents' cassock ('the glory of mortar'), wearing the solemn wig. On shelves behind him, we glimpse rows of books and objects from his cabinet of curiosities in display cases. A perfect contrast with Pierre-Victor de Besenval (1721–1794) painted by Henri-Pierre Danloux (1753–1809), captured in profile between the arms of a chair in his living room, the walls of which are lined with a constellation of beautiful paintings. Opposite the high-society art enthusiast, the magistrate and scholar asserts himself here, with his attentive gaze, ready to smile, without the slightest trace of arrogance.

Handed down after him to his son, the collection survived to the present day through the effect – as much accidental as aggressive in intent – of the revolutionary confiscations, rigorously applied as of 1792 to the assets of 'the *émigré* Robien', son of the Great President. The museum of the city of Rennes, prior to its division into the



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FIG.7 Jean Valette-Penot, Trompe-l'œil à la gravure de Daniel Sarrabat (1666–1748), aka 'À Mademoiselle De Robien', oil on canvas, 80 x 63 cm, formerly mounted on a cupboard door of the Hôtel de Robien, of which the interior section was decorated with a trompe-l'œil of the medallion of Anne de Bretagne; the Robien Collection, Musée des beauxarts de Rennes (794.1.139).

Musée de Bretagne and the Musée des beaux-arts in 1974, only permanently exhibited about forty paintings and, in rotation, the same number of drawings, but conserved the complete collection, with the exception of the books sent to the library and the scientific, natural history collections (minerals, plants, animals) that were transferred to the faculty of sciences, from which their subsequent whereabouts became unclear. The reputation of the Robien Collection was based more on tradition than first-hand knowledge, a collection that was venerated rather than studied, of vast expanse, but with imprecise contours...

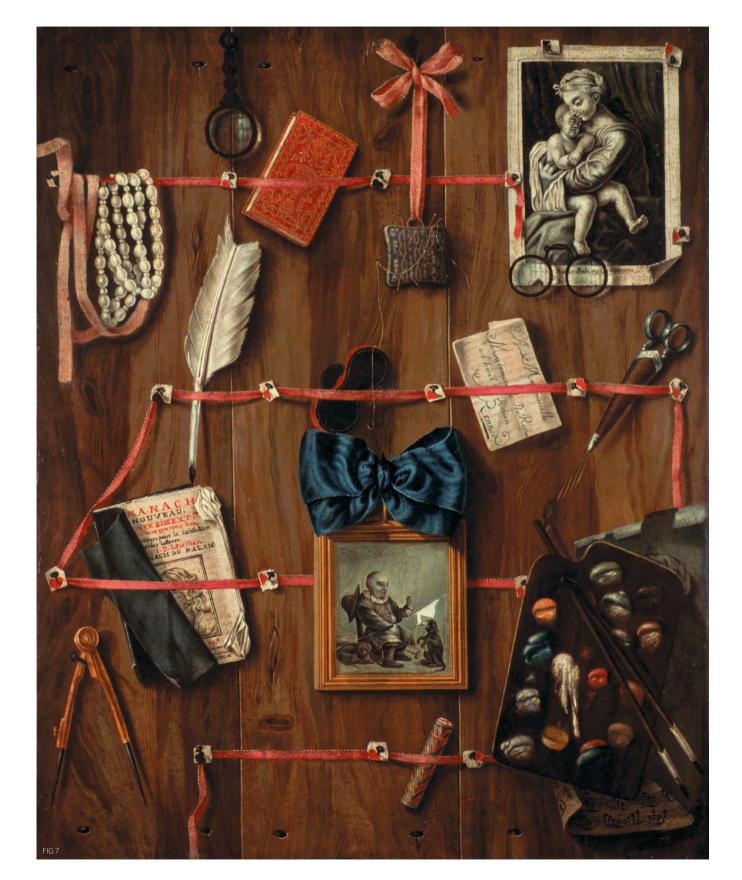
My entrance into the museum in 1960 did not lead me directly to Christophe-Paul de Robien, because I had been recruited to participate in the creation of the magnificent Galerie du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, devised by Georges-Henri Rivière for the inchoate Musée de Bretagne.

However, over the course of the following years, while working on developing two other sections of the museum – medieval and classical periods – my gaze was drawn and even fascinated, I must say, by the old drawings of three schools – Italian, French, and Nordic – which adorned the walls of three drab rooms, each vying with the next for the most illustrious of attributions. I had learned of their provenance and also that many paintings exhibited in painting galleries had belonged to the same collection. Nevertheless, their precise number was still unclear and this imprecision even led to calling the origins of the painting *Le Nouveau-né* by Georges de La Tour into question, which was at that time considered an incomparable icon. Money begets money...

By consulting the handwritten list compiled with great care in 1794 by 'citizens Paste and Colin, painters', administrators elected by the revolutionary authorities to collate the catalogue of the artworks destined to form the initial collection of a future museum, they observed that the first page was missing. An essential lack, since it contained the explanation of the initials signifying the origins.

This inventory conserved at the museum, a large  $50 \times 33 \text{ cm}$  notebook with light blue paper, comprises forty-two handwritten pages, but the list only begins at number 29, owing to the disappearance of the first page. Each page is divided into seven columns that read horizontally, from left to right, under the following sections: numbers, nomenclature and description of the paintings, height of the paintings, names of the authors, depot locations, and observations. To recognise the origins of an artwork, you simply had to refer to the column containing the depot locations, where only a capital letter – from A to S – was included, without any other indication.

A useful piece of information might be taken from a painting that was absent from the list recorded, an artwork by an itinerant painter from Montauban, Jean Valette-Penot (1710–1777), who, while passing through Rennes, stopped at Robien's home to paint trompes-l'œil there. On one of them can be read, among the various objects, the address on an envelope: "To Mademoiselle / Mademoiselle De Robien / at the Hôtel de Robien / Rennes.' Three other trompes-l'œil, of the same dimensions and in the same style, were logically added to the first and, by deduction, authorised the attribution to the Robien Collection of the painting represented on one of them, *Le Marchand de poisson*, a piquant and anecdotal pochade by Adriaen Brouwer (1605–1638), present by chance on the handwritten list, entered at number 101 and preceded by the letter A. What was to be concluded from this? Nothing definitive, subject to discovering another document that, by supplementing the missing first page at the museum, would provide the irrefutable key to the riddle.



O CONTENT

28 MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD - A START IN LIFE - François Bergot 29

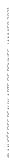




FIG.8 Model of the mobile by Francis Pellerin (1915-1998) given to Marie Berhaut (on the left) as a retirement gift, in the company of François Bergot (centre) and Jean-Yves Veillard (right) in September 1969 at the Musée d'art et d'archéologie de Rennes.

In 1962, Michel Hoog, the then assistant to the educational department of the management team of the Musées de France, while conducting his research at the Archives nationales on the inventories of provincial museums, came across, among others, that of the Musée de Rennes. He notified the curator, Marie Berhaut, who immediately and very generously entrusted me with the follow-up to this invaluable discovery. I was able to record on site the overall indications that had been missing from the museum's copy and thus fill in the gaps of the first twenty-eight numbers. As predicted, the first page of the first notebook provided the key that was missing to interpret the capital letters inscribed in the depot locations section. Under the heading 'Tableau des caractères' (Table of Characteristics) listing the various locations where the objects of the inventory had been found, the document read:

...... La Maison de Robien Émigré ...... A

All that remained to definitively establish the catalogue of the collection of Robien paintings was to identify the paintings followed by the letter A: there were one hundred and thirty-four of them. While an aspect of vital importance had been acquired, that

of the content, another was still be attained, that of a serious critical apparatus. My basic Note¹ only presented, given the edifice remaining to be constructed, a 'modest cornerstone'.

In the post-war years, the Robien drawings had in large part participated, twice at least in the early 1950s, in exhibitions of considerable scope organised by the department in charge of the Louvre's collection of drawings, in order to present the masterpieces of French collections at major museums across the Atlantic. During these tours to dozens of venues from east to west throughout the United States, certain drawings had suffered from over-exhibition and sometimes even from a lack of elementary precautions. This drawback was counterbalanced, if we may say so, by notable progress in the study of the artworks on loan, notably in terms of attributions, which were confirmed or rejected. A highly attentive reading of the catalogues published on these occasions completed what previous work had taught me, from Louis Dimier to Bernard Berenson, from Pierre Lavallée to Jean Adhémar, or from what I'd learned from the visits of high-calibre specialists, such as Sylvie Béguin, Anthony Blunt, and Walter Vitzhum, who had come to Rennes to appraise all of the boxes of drawings of the Robien Collection, conserved in the cabinets that circumscribed the room where my desk had been installed!

The year 1965 marks a watershed in the profession, through the creation of the entry competition to the national museums, instituted through the decisive initiative of the then director of the Musées de France, Jean Chatelain. The fact of having received this first promotion now connected me to the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes, where I was elected to succeed Marie Berhaut, the curator who had saved it from ruin and had taught me everything about the profession. This took place in September 1969. Whenever the administration of the museum and its responsibilities allowed, I devoted myself to deepening my familiarity with the world of Robien. I was starting to discover, beyond the fields in which my interest and attention had heretofore been applied, vast territories of archaeology at the local, European, and extra-continental levels, a field of exploration that ought to be revealed to the public by way of the innate resource of museums: the exhibition.

I chose to begin my prospection in the field in which I felt the least alone. My relations with the two leading minds of the drawings collection, which quickly became amicable and utterly fruitful to my research, were to lead to the inclusion of Rennes in the exhibitions programme of drawings held regularly, one after the other, open not only to the Louvre's own collection, but also to major French and foreign collections. I received a flattering invitation to take up a position in the new rooms of the Flore Wing inaugurated in 1970, which had already received the drawings of the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, and so become the successor in charge of the drawings of the Darmstadt Museum. In my capacity as chief curator of the exhibition, I took great advantage of the scientific cooperation and conclusive advice of Maurice Sérullaz and Roseline Bacou, for the selection of one hundred drawings dating from the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, selected from the Italian, German, Flemish, Dutch, and French schools, based on the exemplary model of the *Cabinet d'un Grand Amateur P. J. Mariette*, presented in 1967.

**<sup>1</sup>** BERGOT, 1962, pp. 153–159.





FIG.9 Pierre Paul Rubens (1577–1640), Étude préparatoire pour la Descente de Croix commandée par les Capucins de Lille, 1617, paper, plume, brown ink, and brown wash, 21.9 x 15.8 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.2542).

Within a climate of intense intellectual activity, 1971 was allocated to the preparation of the exhibition. However, at the request of Marie Berhaut for previous exhibitions. the drawings of the collection had been entrusted to the Atelier du Louvre under the preservation management of the drawings section, for their individual mounting between two cardboard envelopes of equal dimensions (approximately 40 x 50 cm). with the cover card containing a 'window' allowing the subject to be displayed. The opening made, defined by a pencil line boldly applied against the paper itself, coincided strictly with the scope of the drawings, but dissimulated their original mounts. The 1972 exhibition provided me with the opportunity to expose them once again, after informing my predecessor as sensitively as possible, who had been entirely subject to the authority that, in her day, governed the Louvre's drawing section. Effectively, the part that I had chosen to make visible - the mounts - provided useful indications as to the origins of the drawings prior to their entry within the Robien Collection, and thus enhanced them by restoring their framing to the style desired by their former owners. Most of these mounts, simple but elegant (some of which had possibly been created by Robien's hand...), comprised borders in a yellow wash, surrounded by the thin line of a quill; other framings used blue 'Mariette' style paper, or paper tinted to suit the drawing. The most illustrious of origins among them were attested by the framings of two Italian works from the fifteenth century: the finely wrought quill surrounds of the Libro di disegni once belonging to Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) are veritable works of art. The technical department of the Louvre accepted to rectify the error committed twenty years earlier... Without delay, I had insisted on making contact with the descendants of the Grand Président. The Marquise de Robien, a widow in her seventies, with an open mind free of prejudice, an energetic and warm temperament, royally fulfilled the role of head of the family. At our first meeting, a mutual affection was born, impervious to challenges, and tinged for my part with great admiration. By her manner of receiving the exhibition project, I immediately understood that she would accompany the development of the operation without concealing the avid interest that she was already taking in it. Her two daughters, Marie Hélène and Régine, countess Emmanuel de Robien, along with her husband, were to follow the path paved by their mother with the same enthusiasm.

Inaugurated at the Pavillon de Flore on 10 January 1972,² the exhibition was hailed by the public and appreciated by critics, unanimous in their reviews, from André Chastel to Roger Marx, to Jacob Bean's prime reference in *Master Drawings*. Bean described the portrait outlined in the foreword, *Le Marquis de Robien, magistrat et collectionneur*, as an 'elegantly turned essay'. Far from being left in the shadows, the relationship with the origins of the collection was illustrated by the opening day, thanks to a luncheon provided by the Maison de l'Amérique latin by the management of the Musées de France in honour of the Robiens, in an atmosphere that was so natural and festive that one could be mistaken for thinking that the Grand Président Robien was among the guests. In turn, during the exhibition, the count and countess Emmanuel de Robien were to organise at their apartment a reception that brought together all of the elite glitterati of societies of various kinds: their close circle of family and friends, official personalities (the regional prefect, the mayor of Rennes) and others; much of the museum milieu also took up the invitation.

By attaining the honours of the Louvre, Christophe-Paul de Robien acquired fame; he left the wings for the centrestage and performed there a starring role – how could it be otherwise, when works by the likes of da Vinci, Michelangelo, Duhrer, Rubens, Rembrandt, Puget, Watteau were presented? – among the cortege of famed 'connoisseurs' of his generation, the Tessins, Crozats, and Mariettes.

Act II was to have the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes as its stage.

My ambition was to propose the true spirit of the Président Robien's cabinet of curiosities, its encyclopaedic character, for which the selection of drawings that had recently been admired at the Louvre formed just one element, perhaps the rarest, among many others. The exhibition broached the collection by dividing the wonderful accumulation of thousands of objects (the overall inventory established at the time at the museum attained the number of 6,840 items) into three distinct sections: the scientific section, the artistic section, and the historical section. Within the essential limits of an exhibition, each individual item could only serve as an example, prefiguring the key studies yet to come: precisely the ones that are being undertaken today.

The scientific section is hardly known otherwise today than by the catalogue collated by Robien, conserved along with all of his manuscripts at the Bibliothèque des Champs Libres de Rennes – Métropole; its illustrations allow us to imagine what this treasure – too fragile – once was, since it did not withstand the ravages of time and its transfer in the early twentieth century to the faculty of sciences. This collection of around eight thousand pieces, cited by Antoine Dezallier d'Argenville (1680–1765), was one of the largest provincial collections and contained six cabinets of minerals, five for plant specimens, and six for animals. A whole host of butterflies, insects, shells, fish, as well as a wonderful herbarium, have disappeared, but their nostalgic souvenir remains in the pages of the catalogue. The academic cabinet, which was once well informed of the works of ancient and modern authors, such as Réaumur (1683–1757), so as to maintain a laboratory for chemical or electrical experiments, did not survive either. However, the Collège de Rennes made use of the physics instruments of Robien's cabinet to teach experiments to its students (the young Chateaubriand once made use of them!); they were at the free and entire disposal of the professors.

The artistic section contains paintings, drawings, and etchings. Of the one hundred and thirty-eight paintings counted in 1794, one hundred had remained conserved at the museum and the exhibition retained sixty-seven which were the subject of a catalogue. In its composition, the collection reflects rather faithfully the advice given by Dezallier to the readers of the *Mercure de France*, in 1727: 'A private individual might do well to have a host of good Flemish and French paintings, along with several Italian works.' With little interest in 'great painting', Robien collected familial, picturesque genre scenes in small format, of which he found excellent specimens in the schools of the North, or paintings on contemporary history: twenty-one copies based on the battles of Adam Frans Van der Meulen (1632–1690). As Dezallier recommended, there are no masterpieces of utmost importance (his *Toilette de Bethsabée* lost its attribution to Rembrandt), except in a few original and superb cases, for instance *La Vierge au verre de vin*, by Matthieu Le Nain (ca. 1607–1677).

Out of a total of 1,014 drawings, we chose the hundred or so already shown in Paris, divided among three rooms on the first floor of the museum. The 'three pillars' pre-

2 BERGOT, 1972 a.

**3** BERGOT, 1972 b.

sented an overall balance between periods and schools, illustrated in each by artists of great renown.  $^{4}$ 

The etchings (over 3,600) were one of the elements sorely lacking from the exhibitions (for wont of space?). Their primary characteristic is the eclecticism of the subjects, from portraits to historic events, from architecture to natural history. For Robien, etchings were primarily documents necessary for knowledge of the world.

The historical section was represented in each of the sections of the exhibition by just a few pieces, provided as examples. The collection of coins and medals that attained around three thousand pieces (very little in gold, a quarter in silver), predominantly Roman and Gallic, often found in Brittany, was designed as an illustration of the history of the world. An historian rather than an aesthete, Robien was more interested in the text than in the image of medals. Intaglios and cameos, as well as archaeological objects from Armorica, gave rise to catalogues, prepared by Jean-Yves Veillard, the curator of the Musée de Bretagne, who joined the exhibition team.<sup>5</sup>

The ancient objects are Egyptian, Roman, or Gallic. On display in the exhibition were a Roman equestrian figure and a goddess, in bronze, as well as a dozen white marble busts, based on classical models, presented on marble casings from the Languedoc to great effect. The exotic pieces demonstrated Robien's interest in the religions of offshore peoples: a black basalt statue of Vishnu, from India, a series of miniatures representing the main gods of the Hindu pantheon, or the effigies of high dignitaries of the Golconda Sultanate, commissioned from Indian artists via his relations in the Compagnie des Indes. But above all, it was China that won the collector's favour: a porcelain dinner set; splendid Chinese lacquerwork panels on the walls of reception halls on the first floor of his mansion; in his catalogue, his admiration is at its zenith for 'a Porcelain Tower of Nanjing [...] made of pearl and mirrors', impossible to present at the time; while, after having prudently sought prefectural consent, I had brought together in the shelter of a display case the erotic Chinese statuettes in painted steatite...

However, the objects from the Americas did not have the same standing. The sevenmetre-long Inuit kayak from the early eighteenth century, derived from northeastern Canada, consisted of a wooden carcass covered in bearded seal skins, and caused a sensation owing to its great age and rarity.

The crowds satisfied the exhibition team's hopes. From May to October 1972, the public visited and revisited the exhibition entitled *Robien*, *l'homme et le collectionneur*. It discovered in Christophe-Paul de Robien a man of the Enlightenment, broadening the initial image of the fine arts enthusiast. The scope and diversity of the collections, throughout the various periods and continents, the work of the historian and archaeologist, undertaken concomitantly, sketched the figure of a scholar curious about universal culture, an encyclopaedist for whom objects were more informative than words.

A frenzy thus took hold of the local press, who were no longer content with a temporary exhibition, despite the fact that the one underway was, in the eyes of Henri Terrière, journalist at *Ouest France*, 'indisputably the greatest and most prestigious ever presented at the Musée de Rennes'. Continuing his thoughts on the matter, Terrière called for a permanent exhibition, with the creation of a 'Museum Robien', to be established at the former Couvent des Jacobins convent or in a private mansion



that would be acquired by the city council. Several days later, we discovered upon reading the daily *Ouest France*, this incredible news: 'The Musée Robien will be created at the Parliament of Brittany, announced the senator-mayor at the inauguration of the museum's exhibition.' Was this not simply the product of a journalist's imaginings? Regardless, Robien had a new lease on life, that of immortality. This was confirmed in the following years by the plethora of studies dedicated to the man and his collection. I will cite just a few, but how could I neglect the publication in 1974 by Jean-Yves Veillard of a manuscript by Robien illustrated with plates of exceptional value; 'the articles by José Frèches' and Sylvie Blottière' on Robien's Asian tastes; the university research by Laurence Salmon' and Gabrielle Montarnal' on the Dutch etchings and drawings; the essential work by Patrick Ramade on the Italian engravings and drawings; the fundamental book by Gauthier Aubert in 2001; '2' the research directed at the museum by François Coulon' and that conducted in preparation for the general catalogue of the Robien Collection.

How delighted I would be had my notes echoed the sound of violins tuning up before the opening of the Grand Opera. FIG.10 Exhibition view from 1972 Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur presenting the Inuit qajaq (794.1.781), and from left to right, the double paddle of the qajaq (see pp. 224–225, FIG.102), the Guianian club (see pp. 204–206, FIG.91), the 'Indonesian' club (see pp. 350–351, FIG.179) and three African quivers (see pp. 182–183, FIG.75).

**<sup>4</sup>** BERGOT, 1972 c.

**<sup>5</sup>** VEILLARD. 1972 a and 1972 b.

**<sup>6</sup>** VEILLARD, 1974.

<sup>7</sup> FRÈCHES, 1974.

<sup>8</sup> BLOTTIERE, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> SALMON, 1983.10 MONTARNAL, 2004

<sup>11</sup> RAMADE, 1982 and 1990.

**<sup>12</sup>** AUBERT, 2001 a.

**<sup>13</sup>** COULON, 2015.

#### The Ghost at the Rue aux Foulons

During the Revolution, official administrators were responsible for confiscating, for the good of the nation, assets belonging to *émigrés* (or nobles that had left France after the Revolution). Upon entering the *ci-devant* (referring to nobles dispossessed after the Revolution) Hôtel de Robien, Rue aux Foulons, and moving from floor to floor, they discovered treasures that were not to be found in any other residence in Rennes. Paintings glimpsed in the reception areas and living rooms were added to a library in the upper part of the building, as well as a cabinet that would eventually be described as being 'of curiosities'. The Enlightenment had indeed swept through this hôtel particulier, and Robien's cabinet, one of the final examples of the encyclopaedic project inherited from the sixteenth century, had become unreadable for those men assigned to carry out its inventory.

To understand how this hoard, bearing witness to times of curiosity gone by, had continued to survive, we must first mention that the *émigré* whose goods were confiscated was not the one who had built up the collection. That was his father, who had died in 1756. The son, whose life ended in Hamburg in 1799, carefully safeguarded his father's collections, but was not overly concerned about them. Admittedly, some pieces were added to the collection after 1756, but only to a marginal extent. This Paul-Christophe de Robien (1731–1799) had the good taste (for us in the future) to not sell and disperse the family's collections, despite the prevailing practice of the time. It is true that he did not have pressing financial needs, although we cannot dismiss the possibility of a gesture of filial piety tinged with dynastic pride. Ultimately, at the very heart of it, would not the Robien family have been simply parliamentarians like (almost) any others without these collections?



The *ci-devant* Marquis de Robien would, however, be reduced to the role of a simple, passive custodian of paternal memory. For many years, he hosted a concert society in the pavilion in his garden, decorated with works by Jean-Baptiste Jouvenet (1644–1717) that his father had had installed. Although formerly the head of one of Brittany's largest fortunes, he emigrated during the Revolution and eventually became a piano teacher. In the 1770s, he threw himself into the renovation of the ancestral Robien castle near Quintin, in a style that, although from the early eighteenth century, was nevertheless of a rare elegance, leaving one to imagine that Jacques Gabriel (1667–1742), the architect famous for the reconstruction of Rennes after the 1720 fire, may have been involved.

#### Quintin, Nantes, Rennes, Paris

For the Robien family, it all began in the very heart of Brittany, next to the small linen weaving township of Quintin; ancient archives indicate that this is where the family of rural nobles came from. Their name is typical of the region, as along the linguistic border between the French-speaking and Breton-speaking zones, the name 'Robien' comes from 'roch bihan', which means 'small rock'. In the late Middle Ages and then in the sixteenth century, two Robiens left their territory and based themselves

**FIG.11** Jean Loyer (1750–1829), View of Rennes taken from the Champ-de-Mars, ca. 1800, oil on canvas, 81 x 129 cm; Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (859.5.2).





FIG.12 Jean-François Huguet (1679-1749), Construction of the Place du Palais at the Parliament, paper, graphite pencil, brown ink, wash drawing, ink and watercolour, 27.2 x 51.2 cm; Musée des beauxarts de Rennes (1910.42.4).

FIG.13 Statuette known as the 'Young Woman with Elaborate Hairstyle' found in Corseul 1st-3rd century AD, bronze, silver, pearls, 17.5 cm; the Robien Collection, drawing from Robien's manuscript Description historique de son cabinet, ca. 1740, pl. 3 (Bibliothèque de Champs Libres, Rennes – Métropole, Ms 0547); Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.482).

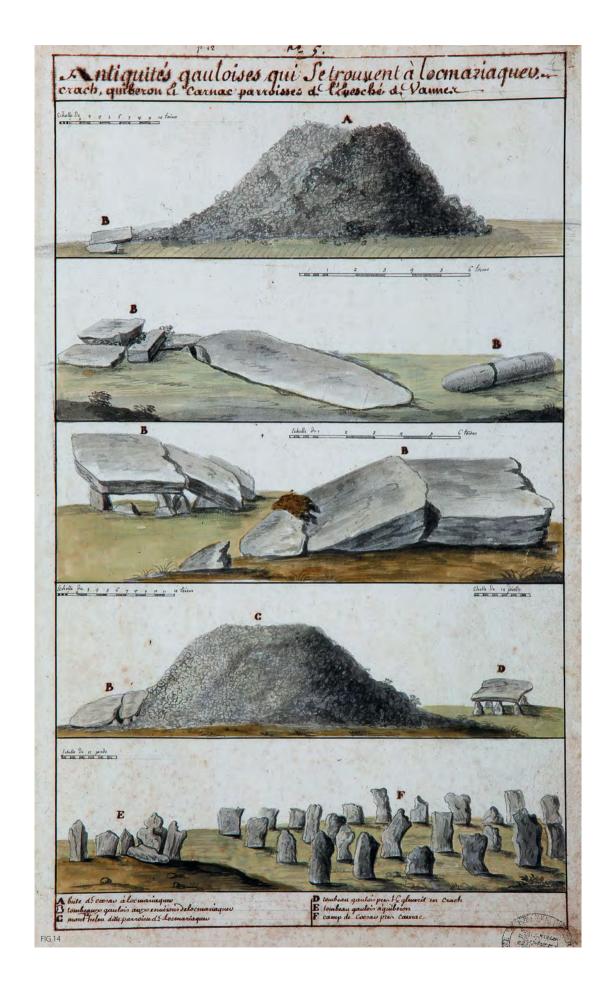
in the vicinity of the Loire River, one as captain of the castle at Nantes, and one who defended Le Croisic against the Spanish and the English. For a time, they were also Protestant. In around 1600, a woman was the sole inheritor to the family. Claudine de Robien married a nobleman from the same region, Jacques Gautron, the Viscount of Plaintel. His name was clearly less prestigious than that of Robien, and in 1605, the Gautron family obtained the right to revive it, possibly as a reward for services rendered by the family to Henry IV during the War of the League in Brittany. And does a song of the time not say: 'Monsieur de Robien se porte vaillant homme / Il entroit dans Quintin avec 500 hommes / Il leur a bien montré qu'il étoit vray royal' [Monsieur de Robien is a brave man / He entered Quintin with 500 men / He showed them that he was truly royal]?

An indication that the family was not without status can be seen in the fact that it was well implanted in Henry's network controlling Brittany. In 1601, Christophe Gautron, known as de Robien (1573-1625), married Catherine de Bourgneuf de Cucé, the daughter of the first president of the Parliament of Brittany. Members of the Bourgneuf de Cucé family remained at the head of the palace until 1660, and as the province did not have an intendant, these Robien cousins occupied the uppermost positions in the monarchy's organisation in Brittany. In all likelihood, it was through this illustrious branch that Sébastien de Robien (1634-1691) became a counsellor at the Parliament of Brittany in 1655. The premature death of his eldest brother, who had apparently been destined for a career in the military, resulted in him becoming the head of the family. His son Paul (1660-1744) also entered the palace and was soon to purchase the post of président à mortier (or president of the grand chamber), and, as often came with it, a hôtel particulier on the Rue aux Foulons. Paul had two children. The eldest, Louise-Jeanne (1697-1762), became the president of the town of Châteaugiron. As for the son, our Christophe-Paul, he was born in 1698 and followed a career path designed to transform him into a veritable noble-born magistrate: college (no doubt in

Rennes), academy (in Paris), and law faculty (in Nantes). At twenty-two years of age, he purchased a post as a counsellor, and two years later another as *président à mortier*. His full integration into the Parliamentary world in Rennes was completed in 1728 when he married his young cousin Julienne de Robien-Kerambourg (1716–1742), a rich heiress from Saint-Malo and daughter of another *président à mortier*. Julienne's younger sister, Jeanne de Robien-Kerambourg (1719–1800) was herself soon to marry the future president Louis de Langle (1699–1773). From marriage to inheritance, the Robien's essentially property-based fortune reached heights equal to those of the province's rich trading families. For some years, the Robien clan and its allies were at the very peak of their power. It was only during the divisions brought about by the conflict between the general prosecutor La Chalotais (1701–1785) and the Duke d'Aiguillon (1720–1788), known as the 'Brittany Affair' (1764–1774), that this period of power came to an end.

What is certain, however, is that Christophe-Paul was not overly passionate about his position in the Parliament. Perhaps the omnipresence of his father (and his remarkable longevity) and the personality of his brothers-in-law, also presidents, prevented him from achieving true professional fulfilment and drove him to develop his skills elsewhere. One could hesitate here between two interpretations. The first is psychological and is fuelled by numerous examples of sons from well-to-do families who develop a passion for activities relating to the otiom. In the present case, this 'son of' would have found his own path in culture, allowing him to avoid comparisons and competition within the family, while still benefiting from the financial means acquired by earlier generations. However, we should be wary of creating the image of the father building a fortune and the son frittering it away. Christophe-Paul fought his whole life to consolidate his land holdings, undertaking numerous court proceedings and visits to his properties and paying attention to such details as which trees to fell, the price of capons, and tenancy amounts. The question may even be raised whether intellectual life was not for Robien a way of distracting himself from the multitude of worries that these court appeals caused. In addition to this, through factums and procedures he furthered his ambition to become the Baron of Kaër and of Lanvaux, titles that would place him at the very summit of Breton nobility and a cause to which he was most attached. Indeed, Christophe-Paul never hung up his robe. He sat at the court until the very end, and also enabled his son to enter. His engraved portrait shows him in his robe, and we do know that he appreciated the allusion to the glory of the judicial realm on his coat of arms. Being one of the major Breton barons and one of the most important presidents at the Parliament were his foremost concerns. These comments lead us to turn towards an interpretation that is sociological rather than psychological, proposing the hypothesis that the Robiens were guided by an approach that combined a quest for domination with a desire for distinction. From the beginning, they occupied the upper ranks of Breton society through their birth (the family was deemed noble from as early as the thirteenth century), but also, gradually, through wealth (the Robien fortune was eventually colossal), and after having reached the highest levels in social, political, and judicial life, with Christophe-Paul, the family threw themselves into the conquest of cultural power, the only domain that still escaped them. The princely gesture that led Christophe-Paul to offer his tamed lion to King Louis XV takes on its full significance here. Significantly, in the eighteenth century, the family no longer limited itself to Brittany. Christophe-Paul de Robien was often in Paris, where his son was studying at college (at Louis-le-Grand) and where his wife was to die. This is also





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where he fought part of the legal battle against several of his neighbours and where he took part in the Republic of Letters.

#### A Man of Letters from Brittany to Berlin.

For whatever the reason, Robien's orientation towards the world of knowledge remained a personal choice: not every great family in the Parliament of Brittany would beget such a figure. From the 1720s, he became interested in the ancient site of Corseul, bringing back several objects. Throughout his life, the study of antiquities would remain one of his major preoccupations, and nineteenth-century historians (always ready to erect statues) would award him the title of 'Father of Breton archaeology'. His main contribution was in the domain of megaliths. From his residence near Auray, he was well situated to study the relics of the ancient town of Locmariaguer and went there, after many others, in search of the remains of Caesar's armies, who had conquered the Veneti in this area. It did not take him long to become interested in the nearby alignment of standing stones at Carnac. Contrary to interpretations that saw these groupings of stones as a geological result of the Flood or remains of camps of Caesar's legionaries, and inspired by Dom Bernard de Montfaucon (1655-1741), who had observed the presence of megaliths in non-Romanised parts of Europe, he put forward the hypothesis that they were vestiges left behind by the Gauls. Picked up later by the Count de Caylus, Robien's work played a notable role in the long-lasting Megaliths-Brittany-Celts association.

His work as an antiquarian was coupled with research in many directions (yet with Brittany at the heart) that aimed to complete the historical and 'medieval-centric' approach that the Maurists, a congregation of Benedictines, were undertaking at the same time. Robien's work, which spanned a period of thirty years, consisted of writing a Description of Brittany. He intended it to be an encyclopaedic reference, dealing with antiquity and history, certainly, but also with economics, fauna and flora, and mineral and halieutic resources. Incomplete at the time of his death, it remained a handwritten manuscript until Jean-Yves Veillard published it in 1974.<sup>2</sup> A work characteristic of the provincial Enlightenment, it conveys the dream of creating an inventory of a local homeland that one seeks to showcase by revealing its rich diversity and glory. And although the profusion of images demonstrates a connection with the Encyclopédie soon to be undertaken under the aegis of Diderot and d'Alembert, it differs in the scholarly character of its analysis. Robien, as an Enlightened man, emphasised the importance of industry and modern cities while hunting down unfounded fables and contributing to the 'disenchantment' of Brittany. However, concerning the highly political issue of the origins of Brittany, he continued to support the idea of Conan Mériadec as the first king of Brittany, despite new and contradictory evidence that had come to light at that time. The controversial existence of this king is the starting point for the whole romance of the Breton region, so useful for resisting the monarchy's fiscal demands. His Description also demonstrated that alongside his study of antiquities, Robien's other passion was for natural sciences, and in particular, rocks and minerals (FIG. 15). Even today, his name is still associated with the identification of crystalline schist, to which he devoted a short study in 1751 that was well received at

FIG.14 Christophe-Paul de Robien, Description historique, topographique et naturelle de l'ancienne Armorique; Gallic antiquities from Locmariaguer, pl. I 04, prior to 1756; paper, ink, and watercolour, 46 x 28 cm; the Robien Collection, Bibliothèque des Champs Libres. Rennes – Métropole (MS 0310).

<sup>1</sup> Description historique et géographique de la Bretagne, written from 1727 to 1737 and then 1754 to 1755, left unfinished in 1756; it includes 367 pages and 141 illustrations. Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, Rennes - Métropole, Ms 0309-0312.

<sup>2</sup> VEILLARD, 1974.

FIG.15 Christophe-Paul de Robien, Description historique, topographique et naturelle de l'ancienne Armorique; drawings of pieces of different types of minerals, pl. III 13, prior to 1756; paper, ink, and watercolour, 46 x 29 cm; the Robien Collection, Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, Rennes – Métropole (MS 0312).

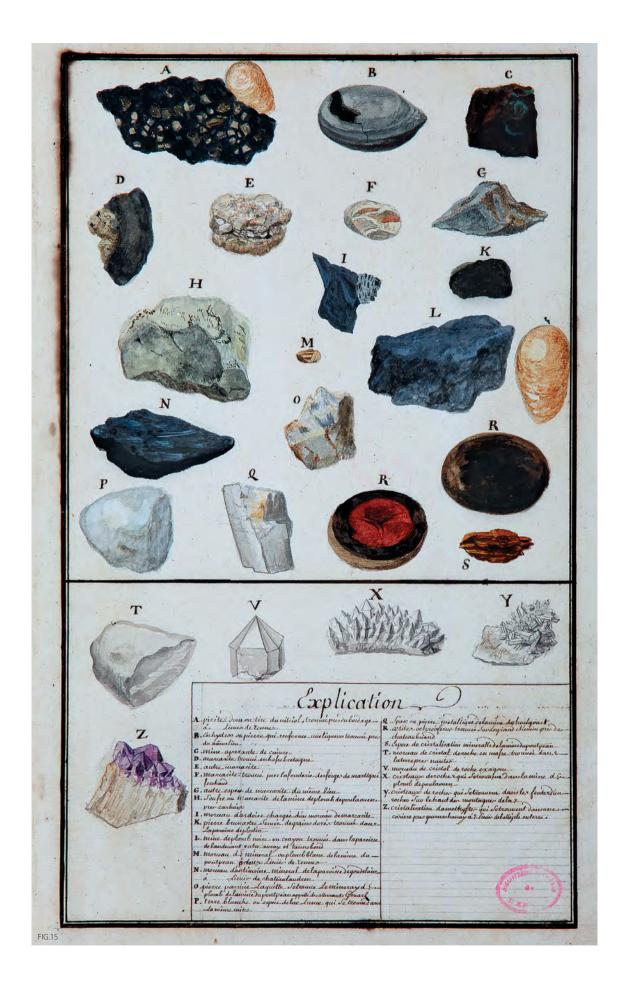
the time.³ However, even in this example, modernity and tradition went hand in hand; Robien did not seem ready to break away from theories that attributed the creation of mountainous areas to the Flood. He did, though, like Bernard de Fontenelle (1657–1757), believe that planets other than Earth may be inhabited and that the Copernican system was 'the most likely',⁴ a careful statement that illustrated Robien's scientific approach.

Travelling around Brittany while also visiting Paris, Robien gradually made a name for himself in the scholarly world of his day, though not without passing for a slightly eccentric provincial enthusiast. Buffon (1707–1788) even recounted that Robien 'always carried [a mongoose] in his hat and spoke highly to everyone of how friendly and clean it was'. Taking advantage of probable Breton connections, in 1755 he was elected as an external associate to the Academy of Berlin, then presided by the Saint-Malo mathematician Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis (1698–1759). He died the following year at a relatively young age for a person of note, possibly on the threshold of renown. Who knows just how far he could have gone.

Like many other savants of the time, Robien's intellectual work expanded into collecting. Visits out in the field served as opportunities to collect items for his cabinet. However, the culture of curiosity as Robien conceived it (that is to say, inherited from the Renaissance) did not just confine itself to one part of the world. Faithful to the dream of recreating a theatrum mundi, Robien made the most of his many contacts in Breton ports and frequented Parisian art merchants such as Edme-François Gersaint (1694–1750). He had the financial means to carry out his ambitions and was able to take up the challenge of 'curious encyclopedism'. The catalogue raisonné of his 'Ouvrages de l'Art'5 reveal an interesting approach aiming to trace a history of humanity through objects. It focused on beliefs and civilisation, which would enable him to associate European objects (primarily from Ancient Greece and Rome) and others from the East and West Indies, and from Africa. In addition, the collection comprised paintings, etchings, and drawings. If we are to look more closely, Robien collected virtually all the curiosities that since the Renaissance had been considered indispensable in a cabinet worthy of the name. However, the 'Crisis of the European Conscience' had made itself felt, and it was with an element of caution, tinged with amusement, that Robien indicated which stories formerly provided spice to the curiosity. And especially, at a time when Antoine Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville (1680-1765) considered curious encyclopedism to be merely a chimera, and Joseph Bonnier de la Mosson (1702-1744) was refocusing his collection only on sciences, Robien remained faithful to the longheld dream of polymathy. Tradition and modernity once again.

### An Emperor in His Kingdom? President Robien and His City of Rennes The Paradoxes of a Provincial Capital

The city of Rennes, dominated by the upper fringes of the parliamentary world to which Robien belonged, is worth paying some attention to here, in order to evaluate whether he was in fact a brilliant exception. In the eighteenth century, Rennes was



<sup>3</sup> Dissertation sur la formation de trois différentes espèces de pierres figurées qui se trouvent dans la Bretagne, Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, Rennes - Métropole, 77029.

<sup>4</sup> FONTENELLE, 1686

**<sup>5</sup>** ROBIEN, 1749.

**<sup>6</sup>** HAZARD, 1935.

first and foremost a city of power. At that time, more than ever before, it was a true political capital. In 1690, the Parliament, transferred to Vannes after the 1675 Revolt of the Papier Timbré, returned to the city and its palace, never to leave again. The previous year, Rennes had seen the arrival of an intendant and a commander-in-chief, the civil and military representatives of a royal power that was once again carefully watching Brittany, as with the Nine Years' War (1688–1697) it had acquired the status of a border province that had continued to stand strong over the past century's naval rivalry with England. From 1732 onwards and from then on practically systematically. Rennes hosted the biennial sessions of the Estates of Brittany, whose prerogatives continued throughout the eighteenth century. This led in 1734 to the creation of a permanent body - the Commission intermédiaire des États - that was also based in Rennes. To these were added a myriad of other more or less important powers, such as the Présidial, a court of justice subordinate to the Parliament, whose jurisdiction extended to Trégor, and a Hôtel des monnaies (which was closed down in 1772), whose wide-ranging activities for many years reflected Brittany's dynamic commercial economy. As a symbol of its standing and as a result of the revision of its town plan following the fire of 1720, two royal palaces were built in Rennes, one dedicated to Louis XIV and the other to Louis XV - an unusual situation. The inauguration of the former in 1726, with the installation of an equestrian statue of the Great King, was an important demonstration of this political affirmation: the statue had been wrested from Nantes, at a time when this kind of monument was a powerful symbol for cities claiming to be the major representative of royal power in the provinces.

Although this list of institutions may prompt one to see Rennes as a bland administrative city, it is also a reminder that it was the setting for fierce political debates that intensified over the course of the century. As a young man, Robien was aware of the Pontcallec Conspiracy, as his father-in-law had been directly involved. He even wrote a text about it, which remained a handwritten manuscript. Later, towards the end of Louis XV's reign, the Brittany Affair (1764–1774) became that of every Parliament in the kingdom, until in January 1789, the Place du Palais saw what Châteaubriand, who at the time was present at the Estates, would claim were the first drops of blood shed by the emerging Revolution.

In the eighteenth century, however, Rennes had a rather paradoxical face to it. Now the uncontested political capital of Brittany, it struggled to go beyond this, and despite several manufacturing initiatives, it remained above all an administrative city that lived from its incomes. It also stagnated demographically at around forty thousand inhabitants, while the population of its historical rival Nantes, profiting from Atlantic trade, doubled in size. Furthermore, as a city of the robe, defined by the long-lasting influence of a devout milieu that drew some of its resources from the Parliamentary world, Rennes evolved differently to many of the kingdom's cities into a city of Enlightenment, mostly as a consequence of the gigantic fire that consumed parts of the city. Its new face was quite unique. At its centre, Rennes became a modern city with wide, straight streets and an airy urban fabric punctuated with squares of various sizes. Everything seemed to be designed to avoid any future catastrophes, but also to aid the circulation of air, commodities, and people. However, the handsome avenues in the heart of the city were effectively closed off, as they were poorly

**7** BLACK, 1986.

connected to the outside. Engineer Isaac Robelin (1660–1728), who had been sent to Rennes in 1721, had planned to open up the rebuilt area via La Vilaine River, which he intended to canalise. Due to a lack of funds, the project was not acted upon, and it was only at the end of the eighteenth century that connecting thoroughfares joined the new streets to the external road network in any significant way. However, even in these conditions, the attractive and modern city centre made of stone was surrounded by old half-timbered neighbourhoods and winding, sometimes wretched streets, from where Parliamentary buildings and monasteries randomly emerged. The overwhelming impression was of modernity as a trompe-l'oeil, and this reality existed right down to the details: again due to a lack of funds, the handsome stone facades of the reconstruction barely concealed the presence of wooden structures behind them, even on the beautiful Place du Palais.

#### Scholars in Rennes

Are we to draw the conclusion that Rennes had nothing of the City of Enlightenment about it, except for its appearance? An appearance that resulted from an accident (the fire) and from men from elsewhere, whether the engineer Robelin, the architect Gabriel, or the intendants? Should we deduce that this modern facade hid an ocean of conservatism at the centre of which Robien, even with his ambiguities, was a brilliant exception?

The image of a city of dried out magistrates and clergy performing their customary duties and living devout lives is an excessive one. Rennes had long had the reputation as a city that was 'sainte, sonnante et savante' [holy, the chiming of bells, and savant], to use Jean Meyer's expression.8 In the sixteenth century, local nobles of the robe included such humanists as Jean de Langle (ca. 1509-1590), Noël du Fail (ca. 1520-1591), and Bertrand d'Argentré (1519-1590), author in particular of the great Histoire de Bretagne of the time. To these names can be added a baroque poet (Alexandre de Rivière, 1618 †), another historian (Hervé de Coniac, 1652 †), and several jurists: Guillaume de Lesrat (1545-1586), Pierre Belordeau, and René de Perchambault de La Bigotière (1640–1727), as well as lawyers Sébastien Frain (1645 †), Paul de Volant (1657 †), Michel Chapel, Mathurin Sauvageau, and Pierre Hévin (1621-1692), who was also a historian. Assistant prosecutor Paul Hay du Chatelet (ca. 1592-1636), one of the former members of the circle of magistrates in the city, was even one of the founders of the Académie française. As luck would have it, the son of his successor at the palace, abbot and poet Jean de Montigny (1636-1671), shared the same honour. As for the monasteries, they were not to be outdone either, with the Carmelites Jean de Saint-Samson (1571–1636), an organist and mystical writer, and Toussaint de Saint-Luc (1694 †), a historian and genealogist, as were, a little before him, the Dominicans Albert le Grand (1599-1641) and Augustin du Paz (1631 †). The Jacobin monastery was home to Godefroy Loyer (ca. 1660-1715), who on his return from missions in the Antilles and Africa, wrote Relation du voyage du royaume d'Issyny: Côte d'Or, païs de Guinée, en Afrique [...] published in 1714.9 And finally, there is the Capuchin monk Brice de Renne (1671 †), author in particular of a *Histoire sainte* and a translation of the Bible in Arabic. but whose connection to Rennes seems to be limited to his early years.

<sup>8</sup> MFYFR 1984

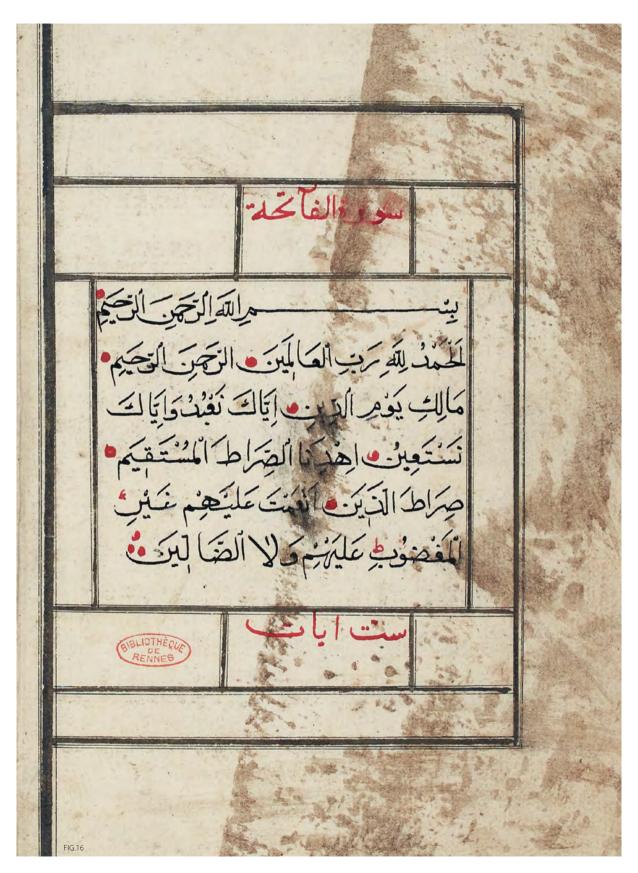
<sup>9</sup> Work conserved in Robien's library.

MALISÉE DES BEALIX ABTS DE BENINES LIANAVIED 3

FIG.16 Page from the Koran (رتعـر الله), 18th century, fol. 1/289; leaf 24 x 17 cm; 'Alcoran Arabic written on Chinese paper, with a cover in Chinese style, upon which are even traces of written characters', Robien's former library (no. 7326 from Mainguy's revolutionary Confiscation, 1796); Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, Rennes – Métropole (MS 0063).

During the eighteenth century, the intellectual landscape became denser and more diverse. The study of law remained important, as illustrated by lawyer and professor Auguste-Marie Poullain du Parc (1703-1782), who was visibly influenced by ideas from Cesare Beccaria (1738-1794) and Henri Francois Potier de la Germondave (1729-1797). The Bar opened up to other perspectives with Alexis-François-Jacques Anneix de Souvenel (1698-1758), a poet in his spare time, Seguin (ca. 1740 †), an author of texts relating to science, and especially, Louis-Paul Abeille (1719–1807), an economist who continued his career in Paris. The latter was at the heart of an entire network: his sister Marie-Francoise (1727-1795) was a woman of letters who married a child of the local robe, Louis-Félix Guinement (1731-1793), a specialist in tactics and soonto-be professor at the School of War. Abeille's assistant, Livois, had a reputation as a botanist and was himself close to the general prosecutor Louis-René de Caradeuc de La Chalotais (1701–1785), with whom he shared an interest in economics and agronomics. Alongside them, the president Louis Charles Marie de La Bourdonnaye-Montluc (1704–1775) sought to develop his land through a combination of labour and spinning, and was also interested in inoculation. The same La Chalotais (to whom we owe the expression 'éducation nationale') also drew to his side Mathurin Thébault (1727-1801), a professor of mathematics and translator of several works in English. Associated with this group was Jean-Joseph Rallier des Ourmes (1701-1771), an advisor to the présidial court and famous for having written several articles about mathematics for the Encyclopédie. Born into a Parliamentary family, the very devout Claude Toussaint Marot de la Garaye (1675-1755) developed a chemistry laboratory and was even invited to Versailles to present his experiments. We also know that around 1720, Monsieur de Launoy, the director of postal services, corresponded with astronomer and cartographer Joseph-Nicolas Delisle (1688-1768). Even more curious is the figure of Morel de la Sablonnière, author in 1737 of a text dealing with the virtues of the bezoar of Jupiter, dedicated, in fact, to the president Robien. 10 Rennes also had its fair share of historians: the abbot Duval (ca. 1727 †), the Marquis de Piré (1653-1732), the abbot of Miniac (ca. 1780 †), the assistant prosecutor Loz de Beaucours (1746-1830), and especially Dom Guy-Alexis Lobineau (1667-1727), a Maurist Benedictine who had left the world of the nobles of the robe in Rennes and attempted to rewrite the history of Brittany by seeking inspiration from Dom Mabillon (1632-1707). One of the most radical philosophers of the Enlightenment emerged from the same abbey, the prior of Montreuil-Bellay Dom Deschamps (1716-1774), whose ideas were to terrify Diderot himself. The list of local men of letters also includes the abbot of Pontbriand (1767 †), historian, poet, grammarian, and occasional astronomer, the counsellor de Caradeuc de Keranroy (1715-1786), a tragedian in his spare time, and writer Germain-Francois Poullain de Saint-Foix (1698-1776), who lived in Rennes until 1740.

To this long list of authors must be added other participants in local intellectual life: Jesuits, who until 1762 ran the college and thus effectively controlled education for boys in the region's polite society. Among some former students we note Jean-Baptiste-René Robinet (1735–1820), who, once he had left the Jesuits, continued Diderot's work with the encyclopaedia and became one of the precursors in the history of evolutionary thought. This figure is not, however, the most celebrated of the former students of the college in Rennes, as this title goes most certainly to Chateaubriand (1768–1848), who



<sup>10</sup> MOREL DE LA SABLONNIÊRE, 1737. Work also safeguarded in Robien's library.

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attended school there for two years, well after the Jesuits had left. At the other end of town, the Dominicans were swept up in the zeitgeist, as with the example of their prior and brother mason Félix Mainguy (1747–1818), who in passing took under his wing a young Alexandre Moreau de Jonnès (1778–1870), later to become the first director of the French Statistique générale. The Bar and law faculty were also influenced by these new ideas: alongside Poullain du Parc, already mentioned, Guy-Charles Le Chapelierpère (1711–1789) produced a liberal essay against guild corporations, a stance his son was to continue, while future member of parliament Jean-Denis Lanjuinais (1753–1827) had the audacity to plead against the feudal monopoly on dovecotes in 1779, and Charles Toullier (1752–1835) began to reflect on unifying French law. It was within this flourishing environment that Félix-Julien-Jean Bigot de Préameneu (1747–1825), one of the fathers of the future Civil Code, made his first steps before leaving the Bar in Rennes for that of Paris.

From all of the above, it becomes clear that Robien was not the only one of his compatriots to shine in the domain of science and letters, and some statistics help confirm that the local environment was not without substance. The list of births of authors living in 1757 places Rennes on the same level as Bordeaux. As for subscriptions to the *Encyclopédie* in in-quarto format, they illustrate a city that this time is ranked below the capital of Guyenne, but above Dijon, Aix, Rouen, and Nantes. Another indicator, slightly later but revealing nevertheless: Ille-et-Vilaine (ninth largest département by population in 1801) sat at eighth position for the number of entries to the École polytechnique for the period 1794–1804, not unrelated to the teaching of mathematician Thébault, already mentioned.

And so. Robien's orientation towards knowledge seemed to accompany what appears to be a collective approach, illustrated by the list of cultural institutions that prospered throughout the century. It is symptomatic that just as the city was rebuilding itself after the fire, a concert society (1729-1733), the renowned public lawyer's library (1733), the law faculty (1735), a surgery school (1738), an establishment for educating 'poor' nobles (1738-1748), the first masonic lodge (1748), a mathematics class (1754), a drawing school (1757), an agricultural society (1757), a bridges and roadways school (1759), and a reading society (1765) all came into existence. The city's forward momentum, which was paralleled by its affirmation as the political capital, was driven by the generation that reconstructed Rennes: that of Robien, who died in 1756. It is significant to note that he had wished to contribute to the reconstruction exercise by unsuccessfully offering (twice, in 1727 and 1738) to create the kind of provincial academy that was flourishing at the time. It is not inconceivable that these failures were in part related to the political tensions that rippled through the nobility of Rennes and that finally came to a head in the Brittany Affair (1764-1774). This event, which greatly preoccupied people and indeed split the city into two camps, led to a decline in these societies dedicated to knowledge, only to later return with greater intensity.

#### Rennes, the City of Books

This relative density is also visible in an analysis of libraries. Note that historians have used sample surveys to gather information, and we are far from understanding collections in their entirety. Among the collections known to have more than one thousand volumes, an initial group comprises those within monasteries that the revolutionary confiscations brought to light. At the head of the list are the Carmelites (10,600 volumes), ahead of the Capuchins (at least 6,657 volumes), the Dominicans

(5,300 volumes), the Benedictines (3,050 volumes), the Augustines (approximately 2,000 volumes), and the Minims (1,500 volumes). Obviously, each collection was mostly dominated by religious texts, but the sheer size of these collections also provides thematic avenues that are far from negligible. The most clearly defined case is that of the Capuchins, who recuperated books bequeathed by the descendant of humanist and magistrate Bertrand d'Argentré (1519–1590). These great libraries were also open, if not to the public, at least to the city's scholars.

Alongside the monastery collections, the world of the robe was not far behind. The lawyer's library, with its 7.113 volumes confiscated during the Revolution, is considered to be the first public library in Rennes and was not restricted to legal texts. For example, it received from Auguste Marie Poullain du Parc (1703-1782) those of his books 'that could be dangerous to religion and customs', on the proviso that they were kept under key. It was thanks to donations of money or books that in only a few decades this library was able to reach the size of the largest ecclesiastic collections, which themselves were patiently gathered together over many years. The lawyer's library outdid in number of volumes that of Robien, which, with its 4,308 volumes, was the fifth largest library confiscated during the Revolution. However, in the revolution inventory, the official administrators immediately agreed to underline its rich diversity. Clearly, the magistrate's tastes and curiosity were also expressed through books, as 'illustrated Gothic prayer books [...] the Koran written in Arabic on very smooth, adhesive paper from China, a piece of tree bark a foot and a few inches long on which was traced unknown figures on both sides [...] a small Arabic and French dictionary on adhesive paper' were all listed in the inventory. According to a previous inventory. Robien also conserved famous drawings in his library. After Robien's collection, the other large magistrate libraries belonged to local figures of intellectual life. Three thousand and forty-four volumes were confiscated during the Revolution from La Chalotais, 1,644 from Le Chapelier, and 1,226 from Loz de Beaucours. Earlier in the century, the numbers of books in collections acquired by lawyers had also been recorded: Poullain du Parc (4,737 volumes in 1778) and Anneix de Souvenel (more than 1,300 volumes in 1758), as well as by their fellow Richard de la Bourdelière, who taught at the university (2,854 volumes in 1785). However, historians are not aware of any particular scholarly activity by parliamentarians Toussaint de Cornulier (1660-1727), with around 2,200 volumes in 1728, and Charles Huchet de la Bédovère (1683– 1759), 1,857 volumes in 1760, whose presence in this list confirms the prevalence of nobles of the robe in this field, and in other domains in Rennes's social life. This was also the case in other cities with a Parliament.

On a smaller scale than those in our library elite, many other collections existed that were far from being without relevance. Although limited to dispossessed nobles, the revolutionary-era catalogues present us with a useful survey that shows that in Rennes, nine other collections of more than four hundred volumes were confiscated. Many ecclesiastics appear in this group, whose interests were not limited to devotional reading. Although the official administrators judged the Bishop's library harshly ('almost exclusively ascetic. There are no good choices' 12), this was not the case for the library of abbot Jean-Hyacinthe Colin de la Biochaye (1725–1796), who, in addition

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in SAULNIER, p. 175.

**<sup>12</sup>** Quoted in EGEA, 2011, p. 93.

to a solid religious base, demonstrated an interest in history, literature, and some of the debates of the time. Among these honourable collections, that of magistrate Jean-Baptiste du Plessix de Grénédan (1767-1842) was notable - according to the official administrator it was simply 'superb': 'It displays the whole range of luxurious typographies. Furthermore, it reveals careful selection, but does not seem to be complete. There is no trace of jurisprudence, nor of history. 13 And finally, an overview of the library scene in Rennes would not be complete without mentioning the reading society, which owned 3.600 volumes in addition to numerous periodicals. However, President Robien did not know of the institution, which towards the end of the century played a major role in disseminating new ideas among the local elite.

Despite a society where brilliant minds shone in the 1780s, and despite the masonic lodges that developed there, Arthur Young (1741–1820) was not overly impressed by it when he visited Brittany in 1788. He was, though, stunned by Nantes, which according to him was an archetype of the city-port of the Age of Enlightenment. To return to the paradox - yet another - of a city where cultured people were present in significant numbers, but which was nevertheless not a genuine city of Enlightenment, after a period of patient study of the Rennes libraries. 14 Jean Quéniart proposed an analysis: 'To a certain extent, Rennes is the polar opposite to Nantes. Less open-minded than its triumphant maritime rival, it would have to wait until 1833 to have a true theatre. Long defined by the parliamentary model, the cultivated section of its population would remain attached to old-style humanism and sensitive to the prestige of the book for longer than elsewhere. There were more people of scholarly knowledge and high culture - the president Robien symbolises this, for example - than in most other cities [in the West] [...]. Without an academy, without a theatre worthy of the name, Rennes was a model of a conservative city [...] whose society, dominated by men of law and a bourgeoisie of independent means, remained wedded to ancient, traditional, and scholarly forms of culture.'

#### How Many Collections Were There in Rennes?

Was Rennes above all a city of books? In some ways, the printed lists of known collections from the eighteenth century would seem to confirm that, in the Breton capital, only one collection existed: that of Robien. It is as if in Rennes, to use Édouard Pommier's expression, they didn't renounce 'the traditional dogma of the superiority of writing over the object, '15 a necessary condition, according to him, for the emergence of museographic forms. However, analyses of collections from the jurisdictions (where inventories were kept after death) and revolutionary confiscations give a nuanced view of this impression. It must first of all be noted that the number of collections identified as of today is fewer than those in large libraries. Furthermore, it is also true that it is difficult, on the basis of the lists we have available, to draw a clear line allowing us to distinguish a true collection from a simple collection of objects that are more or less original and potentially considered decorative. Let us try, nevertheless, to draw up an inventory from those works that are available.

Once again, the parliamentary world comes to the fore; a fine collection of paintings was discovered in 1721 in the family of counsellor René de Lopriac (1663-after 1720).

Stored for unknown reasons in the Dominican monastery, it reappeared in 1750 at the family's hôtel particulier situated in the neighbourhood where the Rue de Paris is today. The estimated value, established by painter Jean-François Huguet (1679–1749), was quite out of the ordinary for the city of Rennes: Bacchanale avec Silène et les satyres (500 livres), the Mort de Saint Bruno (200 L.), a Sainte Marie l'Égyptienne (200 L.), a Cuisinière avec de la viande de boucherie et des poissons (100 L.), and a series of the five senses (500 L.) comprise the most valuable pieces. In addition to thirty-odd paintings, the collection includes some beautiful objects that have a tang of 'curiosity' about them, such as a 'cabinet adorned with shells and crowned with a peacock and with two roosters also in shells.'16

Not far from there, just next to the Rue Saint-Georges, another collection came to light in 1778, belonging to an officer, and son and brother of parliamentarians, Louis-Marie de Langle (1705–1778), comprising around one hundred images. Here, it is the number, rather than the value, that is impressive. In his country estate, he also had some shells, a statue, and an urn. We can find another collection, again very close to the Rennes world of the robe, in the house of Abbot de Guersans (1764†). In his prebendary house on Rue du Chapitre, some twenty paintings as well as etchings were inventoried at his death in 1764. The collection, whose most significant piece was a Saint Vincent de Paul (26 L. 10 s.), was strongly marked by religious themes, except for two Baignades, which may or may not be of Bathsheba.

However, the most interesting collection (and the most similar to that of Robien) was found belonging to yet another ecclesiastic born into the world of Rennes's nobility of the robe. Thanks to the work of Charlotta Wolff, we have learnt that prior to 1793, a true curieux lived on Rue des Dames, in the person of Abbot Colin de la Biochaye. This émigré, an ecclesiastic, ci-devant dignitary who was closely involved in Breton political life, was a son, brother, and uncle to presidents at the Parliament. He had a small cabinet of curiosities with a nautilus, flying fish, ostrich eggs, hummingbird, elephant beetle, shells, medals, and Chinese figurines. The abbot also had a beautiful library, mentioned above, some twenty paintings, and just as many prints. Most of the collection was returned to the family upon the request of one of the abbot's nephews, also from Rennes, painter Christian Marie Louis Colin de la Biochaye (1750–1813), who was responsible for revolutionary confiscations. A former military man and parliamentarian, Colin claimed to have contributed to the collection himself, bringing back two Flemish paintings from his garrison in Douai. Through his efforts to recuperate what he claimed were family paintings, he revealed the possible existence of a family collection, constituted by several generations and including eighty prints as at 1749. Among the works he demanded was a Nativité, that it would have been nice to identify as the famous Nouveau-né by La Tour, if it had not already been explicitly noted on another list of émigré assets.

Let us now leave the Parliament and visit the world of finance with another abbot. Joseph Castanier (1785 †). As prior of Saint-Cyr, he was undoubtedly the relative of a rich businessman from Languedoc, François Castanier (1674-1759), known thanks to a portrait by Hyacinthe Rigaud, which was used to make an etching and of which one copy was found in the clergyman's inventory. On his death in 1785, he left behind

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

**<sup>14</sup>** QUÉNIART, 1997

**<sup>15</sup>** POMMIER, 1986.

**<sup>16</sup>** AD 35, L 966; and WOLFF, 1999, pp. 160-161.

<sup>17</sup> WOLFF. 2000.

around sixty paintings and prints, revealing a taste for famous men, from Pierre Abélard to Samuel Bernard. The sale that followed the inventory indicates some lovely works: a Cène (88 L.), a Figure du Christ (60 L.), and two Figures hollandaises (102 L.) take pride of place in the collection, which also includes many works in porcelain, possible indications of the family's investment in the Compagnie des Indes. The finance world was also represented by Jean-Baptiste Arnaud (1749 †), paymaster of the forces and receiver-general of the king's domains, who died in 1749. Split between his house on the Place du Champ-Jacquet and his secondary residence in Bruz, he owned over thirty paintings and twenty prints. Unfortunately, we do not know what the most beautiful pieces were in his guest parlour, apart from a Louis XV estimated at 30 L. Other images in the library demonstrate a knowledgeable eclecticism: a Jeune homme portant une tête (22 L.), a Fuite en Égypte (24 L.), as well as temples and landscapes.

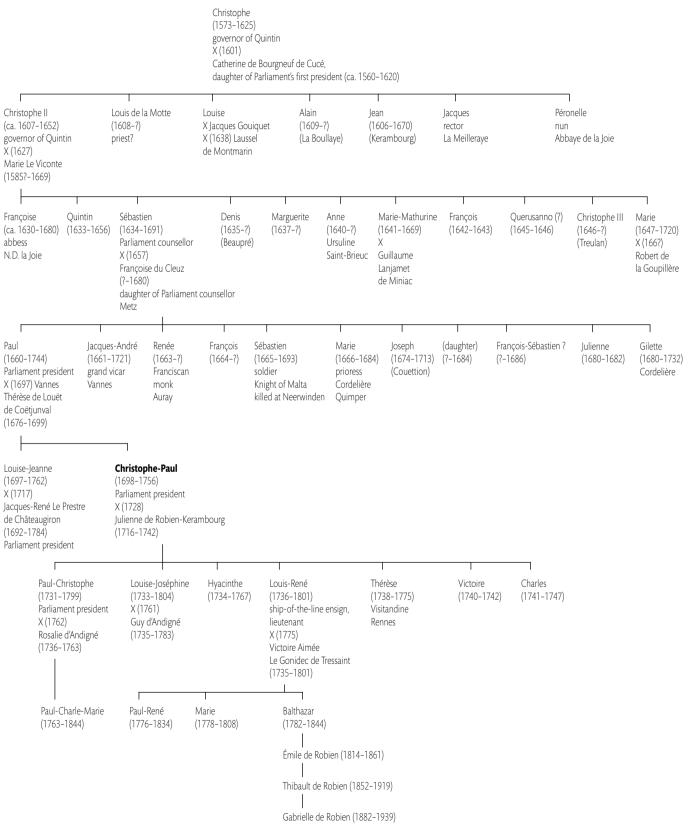
As for the Bar, it was represented by the economist Abeille, whose inventory reveals that after the death of his wife in 1758, he became owner of a 'natural history collection' about which we know only that it was estimated at 100 L. and that it was stored in her husband's cabinet, with the library (more than two hundred titles), globes, a barometer, a thermometer, four etchings, and two paintings of unknown depiction. We also find in the cabinet-library of Louis Delarue (1777 †), a renowned professor of surgery who died in 1777, a charming natural history collection estimated at 300 L., that in fact the intendant was considering buying and that contained, aside from a copper figurine of Henry II: 'Various figures in ivory, wood, plaster, marble, and other materials, shells, paintings, fruit, minerals, rocks, plants, maritime and terrestrial animals, and other pieces of natural history.'

Is this where the list of collectors from Rennes should stop? Other surveys will most certainly lead to discoveries, while those already completed enable us to glimpse more modest figures, which while interesting, are nevertheless clearly less 'curious'. Anneix de Souvenel, already mentioned in relation to his library and his taste for poetry, is one of those. Despite a pronounced interest in plaster figurines, flutes, and images, nothing particularly remarkable stands out from the lot, other than an impression of a certain accumulation. Poullain du Parc gives a similar impression; two large formats representing Zacharie and Sainte Élisabeth are present, as well as a Descente de Croix valued at 24 L. Others could well be cited here, which would raise the question of the definition and limits of the collection. In the middle of this ocean of objects, we do sometimes come across true curiosities, more or less isolated, like those 'two children in two jars in spirits', owned by Duponty in 1780, a dentist and reader of the Encyclopédie, or, in a collection belonging to the Ursulines, the 'marten skin in the form of a shell filled with musk seeds'. Should we also add to the list the paintings of the history of Brittany that so impressed a young Moreau de Jonnès at the Dominicans? After all, every church had its own collection of more or less remarkable artworks. And what to say about the 'nameless museum' that is the Palais de Justice, whose sumptuous decorations contrasted so sharply with the bareness of Gabriel's Hôtel de Ville?

#### To Conclude: Robien and the Desert of Rennes?

Robien was not alone in Rennes. He was not the only one to have an intellectual activity, a beautiful library, paintings, etchings, and a cabinet of curiosities. However, he was the only one to be present in each of these sectors in Rennes's cultural life, along with Abeille whose fame was more widespread, but whose collections were considerably smaller, perhaps due to a lack of means. Not only was Robien active on

#### Simplified genealogy of the Robiens:



several fronts, but for each case he was active to a considerable extent. Time, money, but also undoubtedly his personality came together to make him a figurehead of the cultural scene in Rennes, which was far from inconsequential. A figurehead, but perhaps slightly isolated in his city, and apparently less of a rallying figure (due to his temperament?) than was La Chalotais, even though the failures of the former to establish an academy no doubt paved the way for the success of the latter's Agricultural Society.

On closer observation, Robien's originality also lies in a certain relationship with the world of scholars and the intellectually curious. In this city described by Jean Quéniart as attached to the old-style humanism of the cabinet, he seems to have deemed it necessary to publicise knowledge, an approach characteristic of the Enlightenment. His desire to found an academy was echoed in the advertisements he made for his cabinet. Therein resides Robien's modernity and a large part of his originality. The ultimate step would have been, as Clément Lafaille (1718-1782) was to do later at La Rochelle, to bequeath his collections to a local institution responsible for safeguarding them and opening them up to a wider public, in order to contribute to the progress of science and arts, and in this way, to his own posterity. In fact, it very nearly came to pass. In the only extant version of his will, Robien had considered bequeathing his 'cabinet' to the Bibliothèque des avocats, the largest public library in Rennes. However, this project did not see the light of day, and it was only after the Revolution that the process of making collections public reached its conclusion. This hesitation, this failed donation, this maintaining of the accumulated treasures in the family sphere, as a kind of glance backwards towards the old ways, immobilised Robien, just like Lot's wife. While cultural life in Rennes, to which he undeniably contributed, continued its forward march towards Enlightenment with La Chalotais, Poullain du Parc, and the others, Robien remained stationary, without posterity or continuity, becoming a ghost in the Rue aux Foulons, woken up by the official administrators carrying out revolutionary confiscations, and who were said to have uttered about the cabinet as they entered the old family hôtel particulier, deserted by its inhabitants: '[it was] the fathers of the émigré Robien that had constituted it, but after their deaths, that is, more than forty years ago, it was sadly neglected.'

And yet, it is thanks to this 'negligence' – which at heart is perhaps not one, or at least, not much of one – that we owe the continued existence of these collections in our day and age, visible and original witnesses to the dying embers of curiosity and to the early Age of the Enlightenment in the French provinces.

# ROBIEN OR REGARDING THE UTILITY OF THINGS

In the work of Christophe-Paul de Robien (1698–1756), président à mortier at the Parliament of Brittany, there is a very singular dynamic, perceptible from the first glance, that eclipses the idea of a scholarly hobby: an impetus suggested by the deployment of intellectual interests, perceiving itself as an oriented creative approach, within the diversity of the fields of knowledge and their method of treatment.

These areas of knowledge become the various sections of a resource that the academic drew upon and maintained like a philosophy of life, and that would have certainly given him a degree of exposure within an enlightened Brittany. It is the œuvre and this resource that will be our focus here, less to patiently quantify it in its expression of an encyclopaedic culture than to grasp its power and attempt to understand how, by way of this scholarly mass, Robien strived to contribute to one of the ambitions of the civility of the Enlightenment: progress.

#### An approach to the work

The extent of the knowledges cultivated and their very treatment is intriguing. To the certainty provided by the explanation of realities, they add the sense of a horizon of the world deciphered and placed within reach. Under Robien's plume, the sum of the knowledge that they represent can quickly be considered an instrument. However it is important to understand the strategy present in this abundance, as well as in the methodical element that connects all of the subjects under something akin to a model and, assuredly, under the force of a guiding principle; a strategy that would be chosen to promote a body of knowledges within a perspective of progress.

This idea can indeed be immediately advanced, because as soon as we try to find our bearings within the scholar's culture, this body of work entails a social performance. It is integrated within a landscape through the choice of 'subject matter' – the term is Robien's – and the approach to the mastery of the reality expressed therein.

Due to its nature, the work directs the gaze towards an economy of knowledges, in this early eighteenth century, knowledge that is neither poetic nor literary but situated in the fields of natural history and the culture of human societies. Furthermore, thanks to the scholar himself, we know that the choices were his own particular ones. He provides a key for understanding this within the œuvre, when he declares in the introduction to his *Description historique des collections conservées dans le cabinet de M. de Robien*: 'My taste for antiquity and natural history made up my mind; by serving my homeland, by satisfying my zeal for my fellow citizens, I followed my penchant for these various genres of knowledge.'

While the phrase used still borrows its rhetoric from the former dedication, the man who presents himself in this way is in search of enlightened discoveries and their perfection, he is a stranger to speculation but concerned with order, with his centres of interest, and with the enjoyment of the political community in view. Even though it precludes any project beyond that of introducing the book that follows, we can grasp in this preface a principle in accordance with the work as a whole.

An analytical approach to the studies left by Robien would suggest looking at the intellectual's skills in the areas in which he exercised them. These skills are, however, so diversified and so acute within the chosen fields and their respective vocabularies, that a multidisciplinary participation is the only conceivable approach to evaluating them accurately, and in accordance with their time. Robien's areas of knowledge are in themselves records. Their study objectively requires the cooperation of a host of neighbouring disciplines, belonging to or connected to the natural sciences, from which a historian of sciences and techniques would extract a coherent discourse of a historical nature. In addition, the contribution of several experts in the historic and archaeological sciences will be indispensable to the thorough completion of the enterprise.

As seen from the doorway, the œuvre is the intellectual's *cabinet de travail* (study), comprising his library and a collection of objects, inseparable one from the other, but also inseparable from his academic studies, a production that is not the auxiliary of the *cabinet* but that pursues a goal in line with it. These studies include several books, some didactic and précis works (some of which were published), and the *Description*. The latter, published for the first time in 1974, is the most important and all in all the least clear – perhaps since it was never completed. It was the most important in that, through expertise and objects, it outlines a long-term mode of thought. Its composition effectively began in the 1730s, and the book was still on the drawing board beyond the end of the following decade.

Considering the fields that the scholar favoured, his works cannot be interpreted in a vacuum, cut off from traditions and their influences. They give the reader the perspective of two fields of knowledge interacting, one used by certain liberal arts and natural physics, and one used by the mechanical arts, a heritage maintained in the organisation of the teachings from the first quarter of the eighteenth century. They are nevertheless a product of their times, owing to their nature and design, when the new mind had triumphed, applying itself to what would later become the sciences of observation and calculation and to the techniques of production and transformation. The impression we are left with is that this abundant corpus was developed at a key

<sup>1</sup> ROBIEN, 1740; VEILLARD, 1974 (abridged first edition with commentary).

moment in the evolution of disciplines, in such a way that the study of Robien's work and thought cannot be conceived outside of an approach integrating both cultural history and the history of techniques and sciences.

Starting with cultural history, there was, first and foremost, the man and personage who forged the intellectual, now better known thanks to the work of Gauthier Aubert.<sup>2</sup> However, to understand his œuvre, while the accumulated honours as a noble by generations of birth-right and as a magistrate, two states that enabled him to guarantee an assured social status, were heightened by his upright nature as a citizen, it was more the lessons received from the Jesuits, in a tradition of classical disciplines, and his education in law and in the tradition of legal thought, that are crucial to understanding the fundaments of his culture and the rigorous reason that is expressed in his intellectual undertakings. This reason was methodically constructed in both his cabinet and writings, through the interrelation of knowledge and materials. This reason conformed to reality, with an eminent attention to ordering realities and expressing their effectiveness.

Reason thus governs the corpus, this mainspring of the ideals of the Enlightenment represented by science, humanism, and progress.

The history of the sciences and techniques: there are these academic classifications in Robien's works, referring to systems of values and codifications, some of which are provided as established doctrines, others that doubtless come under new models, according to the experts. Their contributions were, at any rate, to be decisive in accurately evaluating the polygraphy of the naturalist and engineer. In particular, we like to hear comments on the divisions into 'subject matter' and the many nomenclatures that the author uses in this latter quarter of the eighteenth century; nomenclatures borrowed from techniques or from what was to become the experimental sciences. For the period, the reading of the various 'subject matter' reconciled under the plume of a humanist is very pleasant. They are cultivated in the very old tradition that guarantees solidarity between the arts and sciences.<sup>3</sup>

The corpus thus proves attentive to understanding the world through materials and adds to this an emphasis on the common good. As we have already evoked, the study of realities of nature was considered by Robien as a kind of social promotion of techniques and their related knowledge, with one particular value at stake: utility. It is within this same perspective of a material approach to things that the role that Robien accords to objects and remains is conceived (see François Coulon, 'In Praise of the Curious', pp. 118–133), these other realities that guide the observer concretely in their understanding of history. Antiquities, architectural elements, Egyptian statuary, archaeological finds, ancient and contemporary exotic objects, each contains potential information and brings a path of study – through the concrete elements that contextualise, extend, or supplement book learning – to cultivated individuals curious about human talent and to enthusiasts of these sources of excellence that 'Works of Art' represent as gateways to civilisations.<sup>4</sup>

It is also appropriate to see these collections, at the whims of object selections, as the mirrors of ideas that were circulating within eighteenth-century intellectual Europe and the concrete expression of a market of cultural goods. We know that the

trading companies who were roaming the globe brought back art objects and natural collections for the curious and the erudite in their cargo.

In particular, Robien's collection of antiquities does not exist for the same reasons that collections of natural things, or even exotic objects, do. The latter offer a pertinent view of the world; which does not exclude, as it happens, the fact that the scholar's interest in the Far East was likely influenced by diplomatic relationships and contemporaneous intellectual exchanges.

In his antiquities collections (whose nomenclature, incidentally, he mastered just as accurately as those of minerals or fish species), Robien doubtless subscribed to this erudite tradition of collecting, famous among scholars all over Europe, and that had traversed the centuries since the late classical age; a tradition that had little to do with the aristocratic trend inspired by the princely model that gave exposure to royal glory via their art gallery and curiosities. Moreover, it is legitimate to ask whether these antiquities were not in fact the premises of the scholar's collection and, even, whether the collection that they form is perhaps distinct from his collection of objects (before he decided to include them), since he describes them in the *Description*.

To return to the idea of a progress-oriented goal, it appears that the orientation given to the corpus foresaw that the knowledge presented would be integrated within a social landscape that the scholar knew and that he considered as such. We also know that he publicised them as much on organised visits at his *hôtel* in Rennes as in Paris, at salons and in social circles, and through his writings, although his communications regarding them did remain limited to a learned audience.

Specifically, it is now thanks to his writings, once the orality was lost, that we are able to appraise the corpus in terms of the fields of knowledge chosen, their organisation and presentation, and that we know that the scholar cannot be confined to the role of a collector. The things that he acquired definitely form a collection renowned during his lifetime; nevertheless, systematically, these things were integrated into his academic studies as evidence. Natural samples and cultural objects became specimens to be collected, classified, and handled according to this reasoned method that Robien applied to realities, under the influence – surely, for historical sources – of his contemporary Bernard de Montfaucon, and antique dealer, collector, and upholder of the European scholarly tradition.

The works of the collection become facts, which he contextualises within a story. Through their testimony, he constructs history. By juxtaposing subjects, soberly, he establishes a continuum between past and present, remote and near-at-hand, nature and humanity, or between the ancient times of peoples and their present. He interrelates natural history and transcultural history.

And he also describes, in that very act, the intimate connection between all branches of human knowledges, in the taste of the academies.<sup>6</sup>

The result is that the collection is a concrete sampling of the world, which is ordered and explained. And in this story of the world, the history of continental Brittany has

<sup>2</sup> AUBERT, 2001 a.

<sup>3</sup> CHAURIS, 2000; CHAUVEL, 2002; AUBERT, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> For Robien, the aesthetic quality of an object does not lead to knowledge; it is its purpose that is historically informative.

<sup>5</sup> The Benedictine works of the Saint-Maur congregation opened up the channels of modern historical research, through the reasoned questioning of written and monumental sources. Among these scholars, Bernard de Montfaucon (1655–1741) dominated Robien's century and influenced him through his collection raisonnée and his œuvre de reproduction (copies of works of art). In his books, it was not enough that his illustrations of objects granted access to Greco-Roman or Egyptian history, etc., or that of France; it was through the sheer mass of reproductions that he brought about a vision of the life of past periods. See in particular MONTFAUCON, 1719 and MONTFAUCON, 1729.

**<sup>6</sup>** The only work an academy ought to engage in, according to Leibniz. See BARTHOLMÈSS, 1850, p. 31.

its place. In the scholar's production, it is contextualised and contributes alongside all of these other knowledges to its scientific legitimacy and education. It can be noted that it was locally, on the Breton territory, that he conducted his geological research, that he became an archaeologist, and that he embarked on prospective studies in mine engineering, hydrology, and so on, based on the model of work for Saxony by Georgius Agricola (1494–1555), the father of mineralogy and metallurgy. His map of fossils of Brittany, localising mines and quarries, thus appears to be the first mineralogical map of the province (1746). In this respect, we note that it was on Breton soil, his home turf, that the *savant en chambre* became an explorer, choosing the path of observation of realities in the field, several decades prior to exploration becoming a new characteristic of the scientific method on Earth, in the latter half of the century.

Naturally, in this approach to the work, we cannot neglect the fact that the sum of the knowledge presented is what Robien shares of his encyclopaedic culture. It is clear that it is this vast culture that dominates the book, in the fields it opens up, the angle of methodology chosen for each of them and their development, as in the resources and stakes that he sees in this for the community. Again, it is this culture that permeates his discourse, giving a role to each subject in the transmission of theories and observations, in a style that plainly serves and renders a body of knowledge (less minimal than it is necessary) accessible and in service to his fellow citizens. It tends, for instance, in the *Description* towards a vade mecum of the naturalist, for the completed sections.

However, this writing draws attention because it is the expression of the way of handling knowledge and procedures that Robien chose to facilitate their dissemination. This is how we identify, first of all, that what is theoretical is taken from books: the procedure is traditional. The method still bears the echo of the authority of the Elders, but it is almost now no more than a stylistic procedure, using condensed entries of the subjects concerned – we can see this particularly in the *Description* – whereas in the body of the articles, the scholar uses bibliographical references as he sees fit. His library provides the necessary support, chosen by his hand, as attested by the catalogue titles of 1749.8

At the same time, the style is sober and the information succinct, focusing on the essential. Robien's writing completes the enlightened choice of 'subject matter'. All of the work is based on an organisation of knowledges adapted to the reception of experienced and learned individuals – in such a way that this writing sees itself as one of the three pillars of the work: the chosen form that bears the knowledge and orientates it towards its social performance. With a view to a book focusing on its use value, Robien's writing becomes a convenient way of expressing this that also reveals itself as such, quietly ensuring its effectiveness through the pertinence of the realities that the scholar chooses to promote.

From one subject to the next, Robien provides academic observations and professional expertise. This practical knowledge does not read as arguments added to the scientific knowledge it accompanies. More likely, the complementary account of knowledges and expertise is based on the curiosity and needs of the community, and the extent of the fields presented aims to confirm the idea that Robien works for all of his fellow

**7** DIU, 2015.

citizens and the common good. By making the various degrees of scale of knowledges available, the humanist thus accomplishes the task he set for himself.

Our impression is that it is through his writings that Robien presents himself as the scholar of the Enlightenment, in his methodical study of material realities and in his attention to delivering useful knowledge to all.

The presentation made of these knowledges would allow them to be read as lessons in things if there had not been overall, and for each of them, a proven background. For their presentation, he undertakes classifications, develops specialised terminologies, banishes legends and fables, highlights uncertainties, explains or describes things, furnishes them with examples and original plates of illustrations and cut-out prints (notably in the *Description*) – the latter forming relay-sources, as another means of access to knowledge.

In short, the undertaking is that of a scientist sharing experimental baggage and thus offering to the individuals reading or hearing him the means of drawing on it at will. should they wish to constitute their own intellectual background to use as they see fit. In conclusion, it would be impossible to highlight the scientific dimension of the work without evoking its underlying philosophy. The culture and ideals of the Enlightenment are a way of presenting oneself to the world, in this eighteenth century; for Robien, they are the basis of his intellectual approach, in terms of his method as much as his goals. His approach bears probing thought and great coherency within it, permeating it and providing it with its frameworks, a rationale that expresses itself, systematically, within a materialist approach to things. This takes effect as a constant as much in the knowledges presented as in the distanciated view that he brings to bear on the pieces of his collection, and this guides the treatment of all the subjects he broaches. For each subject, he introduces it with a lighter theoretical presentation, followed by a developed study based on an established schema, attentive to concrete reality and with the crucial reference - again - to utility. The explanation of realities, in Robien's work, finds its full expression in the field of materialism and in a relationship to utility. He takes leave of ideas to focus on things.

Usefulness, utility. The notion therefore stands out as a key for understanding the corpus and its power. Robien collects and writes his didactic books under the banner of utility. In his explanations about things, utility is a virtue. Either it is part of the properties of the reality treated, or it is introduced as an added value. In order to do this, he identifies an element present in what he is classifying, to which a known procedure is applicable to take advantage of it, or else he provides what he deems to be necessary information and that a reasoned art or appropriate training might render useful. In a word, under this latter aspect, he prepares the design and conditions of an application.

Far from a turn of mind that would be purely pragmatic and without depth, he traces a reasoned manner of grasping reality. Under the intellectual's plume, utility is an element of method in the treatment of the real; it contributes to the logic of presentations and constitutes a criterion for the orientation of the community in areas of knowledge and the services to be expected from them. Specifically, it is the touchstone of Robien's scientific approach.

The evocation of a philosophy will not send us off in the direction of Cartesianism. Robien did not cultivate abstraction nor did he claim to be in search of truth. His philosophy makes him search for an order in the subject matter and prove its usefulness. The work becomes powerful, effective, and finds its full coherency in

<sup>8</sup> ROBIEN, 1749: an incomplete, cursory catalogue drawn up by Robien of the books found in his hôtel in Rennes.

its development. Furthermore, this chosen path subscribes to the concerns of the academies, which find themselves far removed from speculative philosophy and impose upon themselves ways of thinking about subjects that are beneficial to the public. However, while Robien has a reference here for advancing in his work, he also adheres and appropriates a model of thinking inspired by the work of Francis Bacon (1561–1626), a philosopher of the academies and one of the fathers of the experimental method, of which d'Alembert (1717–1783) becomes a loyal proponent in the preface of the *Encyclopédie* (1751).

In fact, the work of Bacon seems to hover over Robien's work, as much in its collection of natural facts and techniques as in its practitioner's surveys and the construction of knowledges. The influence could be explained, in the mood of the times, by Robien's adherence to the intellectual adventure of the Enlightenment. It is nevertheless appropriate, given the coherency of his corpus over the course of an entire lifetime, to consider that the influence of Bacon's thought on the honest man surpasses the usual alignment with the ideas maintained by a company of cultivated people. In Robien, thought conditions experience and the treatment given to knowledge, which is practical and useful to the political community, and seems to echo a philosophy in action. Perhaps the intellectual cultivates the master's ideas personally. Surely, the humanist finds his bearings therein:

By natural philosophy, writes Bacon, 'I mean a philosophy [...] that rolls up its sleeves and works effectively to relieve the miseries of the human condition. Since, in that way, it would not be simply of present utility; by learning to link together or transport the observations of one art into another to render their usage common to all, and to draw new conveniences from them. This cannot fail to occur when the experiences of various arts will have been submitted to the observation and thoughts of a single man. But, additionally, it will serve as a light of rationality in the search for causes and the deduction of axioms of arts.'9

#### The Collection and The Description

**The Collection** — Fond of order and clear ideas, Robien constituted his collection at the same time as he conducted his natural and experimental investigations. Overall, this ensemble is the result of a collection of items, acquired in various ways, and of the collating of specimens bearing witness to his investigations. So far, this has been the standard interpretation. To take the explanation further, a most unique collection was brought together by Robien and earned him fame in intellectual circles during his lifetime. Its uniqueness is due to its scope and diversity and because it speaks volumes about its author's culture and the act of collecting, with over eight thousand items still conserved today. A collection that embraces the world, built with constancy, organised, visited, and explained... In short, a scholarly enterprise in service to knowledge and reason

This collection is firmly rooted in an experimental approach to material realities, and while it was cited in its time for its rich diversity, it also gained attention for its organisation. Furthermore, in affinity with the writings and exercises in orality that the visits of the *hôtel* and scholarly meetings represented, each of these pieces gathered conveys knowledge, from the general to the particular.

 $\mbox{9} \ \mbox{SPEDDING, 1857, in particular pp. 188-195, and the citation p. 195.}$ 

But, also, with reservations, as time goes by, the collection has been perceived as a subject at the heart of a narrative: enigmatic, familiar, or even wondrous – its sheer size and certain oddities have helped in this respect. Through force of habit, it is under the name of 'cabinet of curiosities' that it has commonly come to be known. However, this qualifier implies a conception of the model in its heyday, the seventeenth century, which is not properly connected to a scholarly approach and that has the drawback of generating the idea of a backward-looking erudition on the part of its author.

The proliferation of the pieces brought together help with the semantic transposition, probably facilitated by the revolutionary confiscation and the disbandment of the cabinet, which led to the loss of its organisation. Thenceforth, it must be admitted that the name thus improperly given to the object-collection has assumed its place in the history of the corpus. The collection finds itself distorted by a reductive imaginary that betrays and alters the work of the humanist scholar, if we are not attentive to describing it accurately. The historiographic analysis of the Robien collection that François Coulon presents is, in this regard, a welcome addition (see François Coulon, 'In Praise of the Curious', pp. 118–133).

Setting aside this poorly tuned interpretation, the work reveals its potential as a source against the backdrop of the sciences and cultures during the Enlightenment period, and as a modern repository of relatively dated artefacts and samples, for the specialists of various scientific disciplines. Seen from this, the most reliable angle for studying the collection, our era disposes of a whole host of objects, measurements, and samples, for which an enlightened understanding is necessary. In other words, it is in the ensemble thus formed that we encounter the thinking of the collector and that of the scholar in its concrete expression. Because we know, thanks to his writings (and this bears repeating) that all of these items are documentary evidence that he used as he advanced in his work, and that he preserved through his organisation of them. It is appropriate to define this collection as a collection of things that are the preserved milestones of a scientific approach, the milestones of a science that fosters the flourishing of society through useful knowledge and its realities, the milestones of a corpus, too, that in the spirit of the Enlightenment elicits or guides the formative experience, like an enterprise in emulation.

In a word, Robien's collection was designed as the material trace of an access to knowledge compounded by an invitation to knowledge. The lesson to be retained here is that if we broach the study of Robien's collection like that of a monument-document, we are taking into account a monument at once created by the humanist postulate of the Enlightenment and endowed with a connoted vernacular narrative, and at the same time, a document that forms the trace of a scholarly project, inserted within a cultural period and political goal.

**The Description** — Among the writings left by Robien, it is particularly in the Description that we take the obvious measure of the connections between the various parts of the corpus. Even incomplete, the book sheds light on the whole. It is a guide to the collection, to recognising its orderly arrangement, and to the scholar's intellectual pathway. Page after page, the book presents itself in its organisation as a collection of studies, as diverse as the ensembles of the collection, some of which are interrupted, notably the ones about cultural objects, much less advanced than the section on nature. More importantly, in its relationship to the œuvre as a whole, the book encompasses the entire collection and contextualises it within much broader knowledge. On hundreds

of pages, we thus follow a method in its developments, with connections that mark the internal texture of the reasoning – and this is evident from one discipline to the next, from one chapter to the next. Here, the scholar undertakes an overview of all the fields of knowledge that he has chosen to cultivate. We follow him, classifying, identifying, and comparing things in groups. And it is also in these pages that Robien the philosopher most clearly allows us to see his self-imposed concept of the utility of knowledges, through the treatment and value accorded to object-evidence, in order to establish a usage common to all of them and to extract new conveniences from them. Thus attached to the *Description*, this catalogue of knowledges doubtless poorly evaluated since it was incomplete and, probably also because its title is understood nowadays within the limited sense that constrains its reading, this catalogue presents the long-term book that Robien sometimes evokes, the book of what would have become his *Magnum Opus*.

To understand this work, if we understand the title in the traditional sense of the word 'description', the statement has less to do with the analysis than with the representativeness of the pieces, their definition, determination, and the status that the author grants them. The *Description* makes several layers of interpretation of the collection available, from that of the trace collected to that of the fact explained, which itself finds its relative place within a body of knowledge, and that knowledge, within a compilation of all of the knowledges that Robien formulates for their use.

Beyond these encasements, the items taken individually or as types within a group are referenced in an almost systematic way as examples of the knowledge presented. They are shown to advantage by forming a collection of evidence that enables the essential notions explained by the author to be verified in a few sentences. Evidently, the goal is to facilitate the introduction and mastery of a world in which his contemporaries live. Each example that he cites, conserved in the collection, is a concrete thing accessible locally to the visitor, alongside other examples known elsewhere, both near and far, in the same field of knowledge. The result is that, out of the entire corpus, the *Description* is the instrument that renders a classified world available under a single, reasoned order of knowledge, accessible through the meshwork of his organisation and its effectiveness.

Incidentally, that Robien's century or our own has detected gaps or discrepancies therein is the fate reserved for this kind of undertaking. While his interpretation of some objects at the time may have been imprecise (since he may not have read the most recent works on some question or other or not have taken into account a shift in paradigm), it is more important to be attentive to the instrument of reasoned and coherent work, and to recognise in it a research process orientated towards the future. Robien's approach is that of a scientist who investigates the subject with order and method and thinks about its utility. That is the motto that applies to the scholar in action. Robien thinks about utility: qualitative utility for the community.

Broadening the perspective, it is the *Description* that most clearly allows us to understand how Robien applies his contribution to the problematic of progress, cultivated in the kingdom. His corpus unfolds, formally founded on the traditional organisation of knowledges and intellectually on a current of thought that is attentive to the good of the community, with utility as its leitmotif. It is this schema that leads to the idea, evoked in the introduction, of a goal and of social performance.

It can be noted that the knowledges he explains echo the concerns of the government of King Louis XV. Reforms are undertaken in the name of social utility and economic

expansion lies at the heart of royal policy. Robien organises knowledges and prospects, explaining their nature in view of their use, without frontiers although their epicentre is Breton.

Furthermore, by distanciating himself, it is certain that Robien paves the way for modernity and progress, as a man of tradition who knows the power of models and, among others, as an enlightened enthusiast who is prepared to be heard by institutions. This came to pass when he became a member of Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences, in 1755.

#### Paving the Way

Specifically, his academic projects from 1727 and 1738 were his expression of the spirit of progress. Robien emerges here as the overseer of a plan targeting the development of the province. The failure of these projects, particularly that of 1738, the most elaborate presented to the Estates of Brittany, did not lead to its abandonment. On the contrary, it is likely that the file subsequently continued to follow its path, adjusted by the political will of an enlightened Brittany, since it was this 1738 project that, twenty years later, could be read in a new programme presented to the Estates in terms of its formative value and the model that it was. This new programme succeeded, this time, accompanied and supported by the Estates for a decade, a geopolitical strategy to develop the province that combined knowledge, political powers, and the public good. It was under this programme that, in 1757, the Société d'agriculture, de commerce et des arts was created, the first in the kingdom.

It is likely that Robien continued to spearhead his project after the academic failures, or else his thinking became a model for his contemporaries.

He and others – he, in possession of considerable means that his works somewhat reflect; the others, experimenters of procedures or inventions already deemed successful mid-century – are the ones whose ideas and work laid the groundwork for the creation of the Société: the public institution serving modernity in the province, charged with promoting and disseminating the progress initiated by citizens in a private context within an organised official framework.

The Société was established less than a year after Robien's death. It was during the session of the Estates, opened on 6 December 1756 in Rennes, that its creation was officially brought to the table. After that, the case was swiftly executed. Submitted for the approval of the Estates in early 1757, its draft regulations were approved on 15 February and on the next day, the associates held their first general assembly. On the following 20 March, its establishment was confirmed by a royal decree, and in 1762, after modifying its regulations, the King's letters patent were granted. 10

The name Vincent de Gournay,<sup>11</sup> intendant du commerce since 1751, was associated thereto. He defined its missions and wrote the statutes. Nevertheless, the breadth of vision, the science and work of Robien most certainly permeated the evolution of the Société and its goals, via the collective programme of 1738.

During the project's ten years gestation, although the Société had the support of

<sup>10</sup> These letters patent are dated from the month of January 1762 and were recorded on the following 3 March at the Parliament of Brittany. The Société lay dormant from 1770 onwards, but in the following decades, despite its eclipse, the ideas of its programme continued to be used, see SOCIÉTÉ, 1769. Regarding the creation of the institution and its activities, see in particular, ÉCOUTIN, 1947.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Claude Marie Vincent (1712–1759), Marquis de Gournay (1746), an international dealer from Saint-Malo, later became a reformer of the French economy, see GUARRIGUES, 1998.

the Estates of Brittany, who subsequently established it, it cannot be forgotten that Robien was in the first row of a well-established social league of blood, rank, and intellect. He belonged to the most powerful social body of the three orders and the wealthiest; added to this was his status as a man of law and the fact that he had the ear of enlightened milieus. In short, though Robien died when the Société emerged, the preparatory phases in its creation were achieved during his lifetime and it is unlikely that while he was alive the new project would have been preserved from his influence when the text of his project was used immediately after his death.<sup>12</sup>

At all events, the fact remains that the establishment of the Société was a success and its foundation took form within a mode of thinking that had long prepared for it. It was the product of the stubbornness of Breton intellectuals who worked, for several decades, on the creation of an academy of sciences, literature, and fine arts in the province. It was indeed inspired by this model. Its field of action was close to that of an academy, even if it was not that institution that Robien and his friends had wanted. In 1762, however, the next step was taken. Once the regulations of the Société were modified, it became a public institution legalised by letters patent, whose mission was that of an academy in the province. Nevertheless, it didn't adopt the name, no more than the associates, who thenceforth enjoyed some of the same prerogatives as the members of the Parisian academies were to enjoy the right of committimus granted only to the latter. The reason was banal: this privilege was worthless in the provinces-États of the kingdom.

This is a determining piece of information on which it is important to insist since it subordinates the creation of the Société and the powers accorded to it to a question of law, more specifically to the respect of the law of the land of the Estates; in this case, Breton law. The Société is a public institution desired by the Estates of Brittany and confirmed by the king, in the respect of the dispositions of application of Breton law and royal power, and without risk of the latter's encroachment thereof.

We will not dwell any further on this question, except to say that the dispositions taken there encourage us to revisit as a probable impossibility in law, and not as a personal or political failure, the creation of a royal academy in the province in the first half of the eighteenth century. The issue deserves to be handled by legal historians, to explore the Breton case in relation to the other *provinces-États* of the kingdom. For now, let us retain the fact that the Société d'agriculture was the first geopolitical public think-tank created in the province, which paved the way for another public institution that this time bears the name of 'academy': the Académie royale de marine (1769).<sup>14</sup>

Competency: the word punctuates the text published on the activities of the new company like a slogan. It is the virtue called for among the associates to contribute to the province's progress with their experience and knowledge. The division into volumes of the *Corps d'observations de la Société d'agriculture du commerce et des arts*,

*établie par les États de Bretagne* attests to this, whose first volume covers the years 1757 to 1758. It is in the proposals and experiments that had already succeeded, shared in this collection, that we see the mosaic of a creative and progressive Brittany expressed; a Brittany of the cultivated elites, certainly, because while the latter were not alone in innovating, they were the ones who shared these ventures through writing and that were read by others. <sup>15</sup>

Competency was something that Robien also attested to throughout his corpus. Whether it was the disciplines presented, his method, the introductory summaries, analyses, observations of nature, or the groupings of objects behind an accurately representative specimen and nomenclatures, Robien's positions were consistently competent. It could be added that he was also competent in expressing himself with pertinent simplifications.

Robien was first-ranked among these intellectual elites. They knew his work and the Tuesday visits, which were even indicated in cultural tourist guidebooks. At the same time, his small treatises brought together in the *Description*, which contained practical information and professional knowledge, were educational, designed as an encouragement to discover the world of artisans and all those who draw resources from nature. For its part, the Société d'agriculture published the results of initiatives conducted in private, contemporaneous to his work. In this respect, the *Corps d'observations* was a source that retrospectively inserted the scholar's work within a landscape. This collection of experimentations of all kinds, conducted during the central decades of the eighteenth century, gives context to Robien's work of categorisation.

It was an enlightened Brittany that, for some, prospected and promoted useful knowledges, for others, invented and tested methods of agriculture, farming, craft techniques, and so on, collaborating beyond its borders; in short, outlining a movement that was admittedly still dispersed, but that steered the political community into a logic of reform.

#### Finally...

Robien, pioneer, precursor: Louis Chauris, Jean-Jacques Chauvel, and Jean Plaine who studied his work within their various specialty fields all say so. It is expected of a historian of the sciences that he teach us more and, in particular, we would like comparisons or similarities to be made with the approach of Buffon (1707–1788) – Gauthier Aubert evokes him – but also with that of Linnaeus (1707–1778) who, in the same period, presented his works, corresponded, travelled, and visited, notably in Paris. Robien, like them, is the producer of a corpus. Buffon and Linnaeus advanced knowledge; Robien made practical knowledge available to the community.

His modernity seems hidden, at times, from the perspective of our age. This is because he was a man of tradition. The word arises organically upon reading his work, because we recognise a form of writing, thought, and technique; a conventional schema that the intellectual adopts to present his studies. The procedure is banal; it comforts the ideas, in a way, by placing them under the guise of a recognised model. Robien applies himself to this task and thus formulates his observations in an appropriate style.

Bacon, one of the thinkers of modern science, was renowned among cultivated

<sup>12</sup> Gauthier Aubert cautiously posits Robien's influence on the creation of the Société, in AUBERT, 2001 a, p. 261 and p. 267. This wariness is clearly unfounded given the fundamental texts and the converging fascicle of elements that plead in favour of this influence.

<sup>13</sup> SOCIÉTÉ, 1769. The *committimus* refers to a privilege of jurisdiction of royal concession, under the Ancien Régime, which exempted its beneficiaries from the usual jurisdictions, allowing them to be held liable by certain other ones, a high jurisdiction or expressly designated authority.

<sup>14</sup> Upon its creation (30 July 1752), the Académie Générale was a private company for all Ports. Disappearing in 1763, it was reconstituted in 1769, with letters patent, this time, and thus became a public institution under the new name of Académie royale de marine; its links with the Académie des sciences were transformed into an affiliation in 1771. The requisite references are available on the website www.academiedemarine.com.

**<sup>15</sup>** SOCIÉTÉ. 1760.

people; following his philosophy meant, for the erudite, conforming to the canons of the Académie and, at the same time, drawing from a source that we have good reason to believe inspired him: it is certain that Robien's work was not that of an epigone. Agricola (1444–1485), the Renaissance geologist, guided his footsteps in the same way, but only up to a certain point; the difficulties of mining exploitation and their solutions, the hydrologic nature of the terrain, are Breton and not those of Saxony. The work of Montfaucon (1655–1741), the antique dealer who motivated French historical research in that century, procured him practical know-how that he made the canvas of his approach as a historian.

Along with the works by these masters, Robien had models available to him for undertaking his own studies, which were integrated within the realm of the known. He thus writes skilfully in traditional forms, a sum of new or refreshed knowledges, profitable and accessible to his contemporaries.

In conclusion, in the work, little of Robien's personality filters out. The preface of the *Description* demonstrates his sincere belief in the studies that follow it, in that they confirm his humanist goal. A citation could also suggest a personal opinion, decontextualised and without an author's name in the work: 'La crainte a fait les dieux et l'audace les roys.' (Fear made the gods and the boldness of kings.) Almost a political maxim demythologising the Church and the monarchy, which Robien made his own by highlighting it. After all, does his work not reflect this materialist conception of reality aligned with atheism?

Besides this quotation, while it makes sense, Christophe-Paul de Robien does not hand anything to us on a platter, not even regarding his toil. The honest man acts as a screen, only the scholar expresses himself. Armed with reason, he is the master of the work, discreet and dignified, as the rules of civilian honesty dictate.

<sup>16</sup> ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 2, fol. 6 v; verse taken from the work of Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon known as Crébillon père (1674–1762), Xerxès, I, 1, 124, tragedy dating from 1714, republished in Paris, at Praut Fils, in 1749.

# THE HÔTEL DE ROBIEN

**FIG.17** Justine Demuth, coloured axonometric study of the Hôtel de Robien, seen from the Rue Pont aux Foulons, 2019.

The Hôtel de Robien, nestled in the heart of contemporary Rennes, is one of its most reputable buildings, if not one of its most atypical. Its familiar elongated silhouette, flanked by its watchtower overlooking the public square, arouses the curiosity of passers-by, who raise their eyes to admire its proud frontage, high slate roofs, and imposing staircase turret, crowned by a majestic ridge turret.

However, it is said that the edifice has been slumbering for many long years. Several restoration projects followed in succession, without resulting in a thorough makeover of the building as a whole. Only a modicum of work was engaged on the former service buildings, fragile remains from the reconstruction of the city after the Great Fire of 1720, in order to ensure the perenniality of their structures.

Fortunately, the majority of the work originally undertaken has spared the facades and inner decors of the hotel, which has meant that this complex is one of the best preserved in the city.

Since access to the handwritten and graphic archives concerning the Hôtel de Robien is restricted, the very heart of the building remains shrouded in mystery. It must be concluded that inherent knowledge of the building is eclipsed by the popularity of its most illustrious occupant, Christophe-Paul de Robien (1698–1756), an art lover and collector from the Enlightenment period, whose cabinet of curiosities is now partly conserved at the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes.

While there is certainly no dearth of studies concerning President Robien's cabinet of curiosities, his urban residence, the home of his surprising collection, remains a little-known edifice that is rarely visited and seldom studied.

#### A brief history

#### The Construction of an Aristocratic Urban Home

It was in the late sixteenth century that Jean Bonnier, lord of Champagné,¹ decided to have a *maison noble* (noble house) built in the heart of the city of Rennes, a stone's throw from the Champ-Jacquet where the city's belfry stands. At the intersection of the Rue aux Foulons (now known as Rue Le Bastard), a major north-south axis of the

 ${\bf 1} \ \ \mbox{Without dates, but the family and descendants are known. See CORSON, 1897.}$ 





FIG.18 Anonymous, after Isaac Robelin, Map of the city of Rennes on which are traced the new streets of the project and the new river canal, after the fire of 1720, prepared with its reconstruction in mind, 1721; 55.3 x 64 cm; Musée de Bretagne Collection (988.0036.1).

city, with the gate of the same name and the Rue du Champ-Jacquet, his residence is strategically positioned at the heart of the city's exchanges.

No contemporary graphic representation of the building of the edifice has survived to the present day. The oldest drawing suggesting the presence of the *hôtel* appears to be the sketch presented in 1616 on the map by Argentré, one of the first maps of Rennes. The residence stands out in the midst of other houses whose overall plans appear standardised. The building is effectively represented as a rectangular *logisporche* (residential porch) flanked by two towers. Its exaggerated size and frontal

representation, unlike the other buildings on the block, shows the special status of the building within the urban landscape of Rennes in the seventeenth century.

The residence, standing opposite the city's southern gate, certainly has a proud look about it. It comprises an imposing quadrangular building flanked by a square tower with an outwork staircase and including a *logis-porche* (in half-timbering?) connected to the main body by a covered gallery leading to Champ-Jacquet. The whole complex is organised around a walled courtyard opening onto the city via two gates. Most of the urban fabric of Rennes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries consisted of half-timbered houses and the choice of this type of construction was a sign of opulence to whomsoever crossed the path of this new edifice.

In 1639, the descendants of Julienne Bonnier, daughter of Jean Bonnier, the wife of Sébastien de Rosmadec du Plessis-Josso, inherited the *hôtel*. The residence, sold to Leprestre de Lézonnet in 1692, was eventually acquired in 1699 by Paul de Robien (1660–1744) as his family's main residence.<sup>2</sup>

The purchase of a building mainly made of dressed stone, facing an entrance to the city and in immediate proximity to the Parliament of Brittany was, for Paul de Robien, président à mortier (president of the grand chamber), a pragmatic acquisition. Although the building was in an outmoded style at the time of its purchase, its urban position was strategic and placed the Robien family at the very heart of the daily exchanges in the city.

In 1699, the building was divided into six levels: a basement level, a ground floor allocated to the operation of the house (kitchen, scullery, and pantry, latrines on the courtyard side), three levels of partitioned spaces to demarcate the everyday functions and an inhabitable attic space on the upper level.

# The Incomplete Transformation of a Maison Noble into a Hôtel Particulier

From 1699, the Robien family moved into their home, but since the space was limited at each level (70 m² for each storey), it soon became inadequate to house all of the members of the president's family. So Paul bought an adjoining lot in order to increase the inhabitable surface of his *hôtel*. In 1720 the construction of an extension to the main building began, completing the facade on the street side with two additional spans on the southern side, along the Rue aux Foulons, representing a total surface area of 100 m² per level for the residential part alone.

These early extensions to the residence were brutally interrupted by the huge fire that broke out on 23 December 1720, which devoured one sixth of the city. The fire quickly spread through the sinuous streets of the old town, mainly comprising half-timbered houses. The majority of the upper neighbourhood of the city was destroyed by the blaze.<sup>3</sup> Only a few building were spared by the flames, including the main part of Robien's hôtel, made of schist and dressed stone.<sup>4</sup>

The city was therefore entirely redesigned by Isaac Robelin (1660–1728), a military engineer sent by the regent, but his radical reconstruction project was quickly deemed too costly. Ousted in 1724, he was replaced by the king's architect, Jacques V Gabriel

<sup>2</sup> According to Gauthier Aubert, the *hôtel* was occupied by the whole family immediately upon its purchase in 1699, where 'the président Paul de Robien and his son the counsellor Christophe-Paul lived together in the same residence [...]', in AUBERT, 2001 b.

<sup>4</sup> The account drawn up after the fire, which describes the part of the hôtel that was destroyed: 'galerie et logis porche' (gallery and residential porch); source: a historical study by Rozenn Battais, art historian, citing BATTAIS, 2007, p. 6.

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(1667–1742), who lowered the sights of his predecessor. Paradoxically, in large part, Gabriel reworked Robien's town planning project for the upper neighbourhood, while subtly smoothing over the proprietal sensitivities of the local notables. The most damaged neighbourhood was redistributed and the cadastral survey was re-divided. The local nobility took great advantage of this occasion to buy back the most important plots of land and thus expand its former real estate holdings.<sup>5</sup>

The Robiens were no exception to this rule. Paul took advantage of the ruin of his service buildings to envisage the complete restructuring of his hôtel particulier. In 1723, he called on the engineer Robelin to redesign the overall organisation of his house and renovate it in the taste of the day. This complex and expensive project took into account the architectural quality of the existing building and the awkward configuration of the cadastral plan, in a triangular shape. His ingenious project planned to double the existing main body of the building on the eastern side so as to re-establish an orderly facade, opening onto the Place du Champ-Jacquet. New service buildings housing the stables adjoined the new main body of the house. And so the hôtel easily quadrupled its livable surface (over 420 m<sup>2</sup> for each of the two first levels). The new abode accommodated the formal lounges opening onto a large cour d'honneur, and the original building held more intimate reception rooms (notably a chambre de parade with alcoves). The project also foresaw the removal of the turret spiral staircase in favour of an external monumental central staircase, installed in the central pavilion of the new main block. This archaistic interior arrangement is surprising for an architectural choice that aimed to optimise the space and interior traffic. This kind of arrangement had almost disappeared from private residences since the early seventeenth century in favour of convenience and practicality. It was therefore an ambitious restructuring project for what was basically a humble abode, which was never actually realised, since Robelin left the city of Rennes in 1724.

Was that to say that the Robiens did not have the means to match their ambition in terms of this operation? Gauthier Aubert<sup>6</sup> suggests instead that the Rennes-based nobility, traditionally rural yet also rate-payers to the Parliament of Brittany, preferred a pied-à-terre in the city as opposed to luxurious urban residences. The Rennes nobles, while comforted in their social status through the obtention of the hereditary taxation owed to the Parliament, owned properties in the provinces whose value largely surpassed that of their city properties. The reason for this withdrawal on the part of the Robien family to this rather unexpansive *hôtel particulier* would therefore be the balance they had struck between a familial château of very generous size, located on the Côtes d'Armor, and a *hôtel particulier* strategically placed within the city, between which the Robiens would travel throughout the year.

After the abandonment of the project, it seems that the Robiens (father or son) wished to restore their interiors in the taste of the day, because significant renovation work was begun in the main body of the house in order to accommodate the family (at least ten Robiens lived year-round at the *hôtel particulier*\*). In addition, extensions were economically built to restructure the service buildings of the *hôtel*. Adjoining the

house on the courtyard side, these half-timbered buildings still exist and are currently the subject of a vast restoration campaign.

These restructurings dating from the time of the Robiens went hand in hand with the acquisition of a plot located on the other side of the Rue du Champ-Jacquet, enabling the creation of a garden adjacent to the *hôtel particulier*, at the back of which a charming workshop was located, known as the 'Trianon' by the contemporaries of the parliamentarian in reference to the first Trianons of Versailles.<sup>10</sup>

Christophe-Paul died in 1756, leaving the management of the family assets to his eldest son, Paul-Christophe-Céleste (1731–1799). The latter conserved his father's collections rather than dispersing them at auction<sup>11</sup> and continued to enhance the paternal collection through the acquisition of new works.<sup>12</sup>

Paul-Christophe-Céleste also conserved the familial *hôtel particulier*, the jewel of the paternal collection, which he progressively extended through the purchase of adjoining allotments. A second attempt at enlargement and restructuring of the hôtel was considered in 1771.

This project proposed a reasonable plan to double the depth of the main building, on the courtyard side, and (again) to remove the adjoining staircase turret, replaced by the central outer staircase already chosen by Robelin in his 1723 project. Although it reworked some of the characteristics of major Parisian *hôtels* of the mid-eighteenth century (a symmetrical sloping building with a central avant-corps and arranged floor plan, with a flight of front steps), this design was not distinguished by its originality, particularly concerning the space accorded to the huge monumental staircase that remained cumbersome and retained its orientation.

The rest is history. The *hôtel* was not expanded, probably for financial reasons, perhaps also out of a lack of taste for ostentation. The Robiens eventually contented themselves with their property just as it was, up until the revolutionary period.

# The Transformation of the Hôtel Particulier into an Investment Property

During the Revolution, the *hôtel* was confiscated, divided into several apartments, <sup>13</sup> and sold as a national asset in 1795. Consequently, transformations and renovations were undertaken for the convenience of the new occupants (addition of bathrooms, kitchens, mezzanine floors, etc.).

In the nineteenth century, a restaurant moved into the ground floor on the site of the former kitchen. It was replaced in the early twentieth century by the Bahon-Rault bookstore that is still present a few metres from the Robien hôtel.

On 1 June 1965, the body of the main house (exteriors and interiors) was listed as a historic monument. Restoration work was immediately undertaken, aiming to restore the silhouette of the original coverings (notably the reproduction of the roof lanterns of the bartizet and staircase). Occasional excavation and restoration works for the interior decors on the first floor were also undertaken in 1975.

In 1995, the bank Crédit Agricole became the owner of the ground floor and first floor, and conducted serious work to transform these spaces into a commercial premises.

**<sup>5</sup>** JARNOUX, 1996, p. 38 ff.

<sup>6</sup> AUBERT, 2001 a.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

**<sup>10</sup>** AUBERT, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> The wonderful natural history and curiosities collection of Joseph Bonnier de la Mosson (1702–1744) was dispersed upon his death by his widow, as the collector had ruined his family through his excessive lifestyle, well above his means.

<sup>12</sup> François Coulon, 'Sur la collection de tableaux du président de Robien', in COULON, 2015 b, pp. 11-12. Paul-Christophe even bought back two buildings on the south side of the hôtel, most likely in order to install part of the collections therein.

**<sup>13</sup>** Agreement of sale as a national asset of 1795, conserved under document AD 35 1Q10.

The two apartments on the upper floors still remain private lodgings. Today, the building is managed by co-ownership.

# Typological characteristics

Establishing a private residence in an existing neighbourhood, on a constrained site is no easy task. While the Middle Ages took no offence at irregular urban plans and buildings with expressive architecture, reflecting the uses made of it within, on its facades, the classical age attempted to tame architectural forms in order to appease the eye. Concerning the Hôtel de Robien, built in the midst of the urban centre, several constraints were to give rise to this sober yet atypical architecture.

The first difficulty was its implantation in the heart of the city. Since the seventeenth century and the gradual demolition of the fortified gates of the city of Rennes, the sector of the Portes aux Foulons had been an integral part of the city, whose constructions progressively colonised the former moats situated at the foot of the ramparts, which further densified the neighbourhood, if that were possible. The proximity of the Place du Champ-Jacquet, the point of convergence of numerous urban thoroughfares, and the densification of the cadastral plan rendered the sector particularly noisy. It is true that, in its desire for pomp and demonstration, the Hôtel de Robien had to be seen in the midst of the extremely dense urban fabric. Owing to its position at the prow of a residential block, the residence was exposed to the gaze of the population. Nevertheless, the Robiens had arranged a 'buffer zone' on the courtyard side by retaining the service buildings that placed the public square at a distance from their reception rooms, which were high enough to be inaccessible to the view of passers-by.

The second difficulty stemmed from the irregularity of the cadastral plan within which the building was based. Unlike other hôtels particuliers that are showcased at the back of a courtyard, the Hôtel de Robien dared to remain symmetrical despite an irregular site plan and was set within a narrow triangular plot that did not allow a perspective of the building from street level. The architectural choice made presents a main body with a rectangular plan on the street-side that contains the noble rooms. This main section occupies almost half of the available floor plan. An independent staircase turret with a square plan, as well as a single bartizet with a circular plan, overlooking the open square in front of the former Porte aux Foulons, are grafted onto the main building.

The architectural volume of the Hôtel de Robien is therefore the result of a restricting urban context that later impeded the extension of the residence, as the Robien family had considered on several occasions.

# Architectural and archeological description

# The Entrance Sequence

Access to the Hôtel de Robien is undertaken via a large porch marked by two matching square granite piles, crowned by capitals with high chamfered abacuses and moulded substructures. This large entrance gate opens onto a trapezoidal courtyard through carved wooden double gates.

In the seventeenth century, this porch was crowned by a half-timbered gallery resting against the external wall, which has been preserved. Originally, two gates are mentioned in the inventories. This atypical arrangement was a direct result of the narrow nature of the plot. It would appear to be difficult to manœuvre a coach within the hôtel's courtyard, given that this was a service building that could only



FIG 19 The transformation from hôtel particulier to investment property, north gable of the Hôtel de Robien prior to the roofing repairs; view from the Rue du Champ Jaquet-Rue Pont aux Foulons; old postcard, early 20th century.

be located at the current site of the buildings located at 16 and 18 Rue du Champ-Jacquet. Consequently, one gate was used by vehicles that would drop off their occupants in front of the spiral staircase and then leave by the other gate. Another clue demonstrates the narrowness of the former arrangement of the courtyard: the two piles belonging to the old gate that have been conserved are symmetrical on the street side, but asymmetrical on the courtyard side. Indeed, the opening of one of the interior splayed jambs is much more pronounced than on the other pile, so as to facilitate the manœuvres of vehicles within the tight courtyard.

As with most contemporary hôtels particuliers found within a constrained urban fabric, the Hôtel de Robien does not separate the noble, exterior spaces from those allocated to service. No poultry yard is mentioned in the inventories, the service buildings faced the hôtel directly, with the kitchen and cellars on its lower floors.

# The Architectural Treatment of the Facades

The proportions of the former *masion noble* of Jean Bonnier are particularly atypical (12 m long, 8 m wide, and 17 m in elevation, excluding the roof). This assertive verticality, coupled with the addition of a bartizet on two levels and a staircase turret imposing its great stature opposite the belfry of Champ-Jacquet, lends to the residence the air of a tower or dungeon, a pretention reserved for the nobility, freshly acquired by the Bonnier family in 1594. It was therefore a building with the veneer of a status symbol that Jean Bonnier had built opposite the city's southern gate.

In order to reinforce the prestige of his residence, Jean Bonnier had his *hôtel* built according to the same architectonic principles as the Parliament of Brittany, which was almost contemporary with its construction.

The elevation, mainly comprising layered schists, was covered with sealing plaster, probably with false joins in order to imitate limestone bonding to match the quality of the upper parts of the building, whose ornamental pieces were made of limestone. The plastered facade rests on a matching granite base covering the ground floor. The ensemble is topped by a high slate roof surrounded by a cornice with modillions, adorned with monumental limestone dormer windows featuring arched indented pediments and chimney stumps with particularly finely wrought crowning.

The overall effect is impressive: the play of contrasts between the dark grey granite, the light-coloured plaster imitating the stone used on the upper parts of the building, and the high slate roof, was partly inspired by other contemporary civic edifices, notably the Parliament of Rennes, which uses the same logic of contrasts in the design of its facade.

The quality of the materials used clearly demonstrates the wealth of the owner, who did not hesitate to demonstrate his prestige by building a two-storied bartizet on granite squinches at the prow of his building, covered by a roof lantern and strategically placed opposite the major north-south route of the city.

On the street side, the facade is regularly pierced by six open sections with simple framings and granite sill mouldings, the first two levels adorned by railings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As for the third floor, it has conserved its granite-framed openings, formed by a moulded sill placed on brackets, on which rest two Doric pilasters supporting a slightly protruding lintel. This original arrangement is also conserved on the courtyard side on the two upper square levels. When the southern extension of the residence was added, the two complementary spans were treated in exactly the same way as the four pre-existing ones, so as to harmonise the ensemble.

Despite its apparent overall coherence, the facade on Rue Le Bastard was subject to numerous modifications over time.

One of the first transgressions pertains to the enlargement of all of the first-floor openings and those of the second floor on the street side. The lintels and original sills have disappeared, sectioning in many places the moulded support brackets situated between the ground floor and the first floor. Given the coherency of these openings

with the interior layouts, these enlargements possibly date from the second quarter of the eighteenth century, during which new interior decors were created within the  $h\hat{o}tel$ . These adjustments coincide with the installation of the wrought iron railings, the most majestic and detailed of which are found on the first floor.

A priori, on the Rue aux Foulons side, the wooden dormer windows with arched pediments and lateral volutes did not exist in the seventeenth century. Given the profile of the imposing stone dormer windows adorning the other facades, these would have had a definite impact on the design of the framework on the street side, of which we find no trace in the attic. Their profile leads us to imagine that they date from the first half of the eighteenth century, the period in which the attic housed Christophe-Paul's magnificent book collection.

A subsequent modification, mentioned in the inventory documents, records the enlargement of the former basement windows on the street side, during the installation in the nineteenth century of a restaurant on the ground floor of the *hôtel*. In this way, large openings let light into the reception hall. This level, in direct contact with the street, was originally dimly lit by the basement windows, which appears to be coherent with the fact that the Rue aux Foulons was insalubrious and subject to heavy traffic in the early eighteenth century, like all of the Champ-Jacquet neighbourhood. Similarly, the large opening with a drop arch in the southern sidewall was a latter-day creation applied to the substructure so as to create an identifiable entrance for a business.

On the courtyard side, the facade initially seems much more chaotic. It is effectively encased between the staircase turret, the glass gallery added in the early twentieth century, and the neighbouring buildings built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And yet this facade is largely visible from the street. The *hôtel* is located below the ramparts pathway that runs along the southern fringe of the city. Turned towards the Place du Champ-Jacquet, its eastern facade is clearly visible from this major public space in the city, which until the seventeenth century contained the city's belfry.

Originally, the facade was impressive. With its elevation accentuated by its narrow surrounds, it was adorned at each level by high openings with granite framings identical to the ones still present on the street side on the third floor (except at the gallery level where the openings have been modified), and crowned by a monumental skylight similar to the one on the southern gable. On the third floor, a hallway lit by an arched opening, overlooking the courtyard, makes the connection between the vertical circulation and the residence. Contributing to the majesty of the whole complex, the staircase turret, monumentalised by its high stature (nearly 20 m high), is crowned by an imperial-style roof featuring a ridge turret.

The choice of an independent staircase may seem outdated, during a period of transition in the history of architecture between the independent spiral staircase and the adjoining staircase with successive straight flights. However, this was not a unique case in Rennes in the early seventeenth century. The reasons for this choice were doubtless as pragmatic as they were symbolic. The lack of space on the plot imposed the rejection of the staircase towards the exterior, which allowed the regular volumetry of the apartments on each level to be preserved. On the other hand, its silhouette is a sign

**<sup>14</sup>** The same arrangement exists on the courtyard residence of the Hôtel de Moussaye, contemporary to the Hôtel de Robien.





**FIG.20** First floor of the Hôtel de Robien, northern elevation of the grand Salon de compagnie.

of opulence that can only attract attention, in an urban landscape marked by the norm of half-timbered constructions that were two or three stories high at best.

The third facade, the most exposed to public view, is a monumental blind wall flanked by a rounded bartizet and crowned by a dormer window in dressed stone adjoining a chimney stump (*souche de cheminée*) that was originally plastered over. This one culminates in a monumental stone carved on its four sides. This elevation impresses passers-by. The Hôtel de Robien asserts itself as the prow of the block that it precedes.

# The Windows of the Building

It is certain that during the construction of the building in 1596, the exterior woodwork of the *hôtel* was endowed with stained-glass windows, like those conserved in the bartizet. They were equipped with an arched transom in colourful stained glass. The closure of the two casements, divided into two compartments, is ensured by sash-bolts on oval plates, in accordance with the norms of the period. While the windows and their panes are well conserved in place, the sash-bolts sadly no longer exist.

In the eighteenth century, with successive restructuring, the openings were enlarged and new woodwork was fitted. Originally, these had small squares, hand-blown panes, and little wooden mouldings. <sup>15</sup> A later modification <sup>16</sup> transformed them into large

squares; an arrangement conserved today. Their casements, whose closure systems are partially in place, are armed with interior shutters. The espagnolette bolts of the overall windows have disappeared, replaced by modern cremones, whereas the interior shutters on the first floor (the only extant examples) can still be closed. Their sash-bolts and spring-loaded hinges, decorated with thistle motifs, are in place and operational.

# The Roofing: A Monumental Covering

The high stature of the Hôtel de Robien remains accentuated by the architectural treatment of its roofing.

On the body of the main building, the high two-sided gable covered in slate ends on the southern side in a pillion that lessens its volumetry. Its original framework with rafters forming trusses is still preserved.

Ostentation is taken here to its paroxysm: the roof bristles with architectural elements highlighting the verticality of the building, like the high chimney stump on the southern pediment and the stone dormer windows with the original, Renaissance-inspired, arched indented pediment. This original model seems to have had a degree of success among the contemporary buildings of the city, notably at the Hôtel de Pinieuc located at 22 Rue de la Monnaie, as well as at the Château de Maurepas (once situated on Rue de Fougères but destroyed in 1967).<sup>17</sup>

In the south, the rounded roof of the bartizet is crowned with a wooden roof lantern with arcades covered by conical lead tapered slates. At the top of the staircase turret, an original roof style known as 'à l'impériale' made of slate tiles and ending in a roof lantern placed on six semicircular arches on moulded pilasters crowns this addition. The roof covering, renovated in the second half of the twentieth century, repeats models of roof lanterns in harmony with the proportions of the building, despite the absence of traces of their original elevation.

# The Service Buildings

The hôtel particulier inevitably comprises service buildings. The original outbuildings, about which we have few sources, were entirely destroyed in the city's Great Fire. It is possible that these constructions, spanning several levels, housed the service buildings of the hôtel and rented lodgings, as was the case for other hôtels particuliers in Rennes. During the reconstruction after the fire, half-timbered buildings, built around a small courtyard, contained the living areas of the servants.

# A Pleasant, Non-Adjacent Garden

In the eighteenth century, the hotel garden did not directly adjoin the *hôtel*, since the neighbouring plots had already been built on. The position chosen was located opposite the entrance, on the other side of the Rue du Champ-Jacquet.

As proof of the very special attention paid to this place, Christophe-Paul de Robien had a 'folie' built there, which the eighteenth century abounded in, fond as it was of a certain art of living. Gauthier Aubert found an elevation drawing of this garden studio, represented like a small one-storey building pierced by three arcades and

<sup>15</sup> The remains of the notches in the initial wooden pieces are visible on the building with the windows open.

<sup>16</sup> Prior to the Revolution.

<sup>17</sup> See archive photos of the two buildings.

**<sup>18</sup>** The Hôtel de la Moussaye, built in the early seventeenth century was designed according to this layout.

covered by a pagoda-style roof.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, an article from the local press in the late nineteenth century<sup>20</sup> instead describes a one-storey building with an attic above it, pierced by five great arched openings with ornate keystones featuring human faces, with one central door adorned with a triangular pediment. No doubt the original building had been modified. The building, demolished in 1905, has left no additional indication as to its appearance.

While the Hôtel de Robien reflects the power of its owners through a sober and powerful architectural language that does not overdo the external ornaments, the contrast is captivating with its extravagant interior decors, which are richly sculpted and highly demonstrative.

# Interior layout and decors

The Hôtel de Robien is divided into six levels, two of which are dedicated to the service areas and four of which are residential.

### The Basements

The residence is built on a complete level of basements, separated into two distinct volumes. One is located under the house on the road side, the other covers the surface extending between the house and the extensions over the small courtyard. The first was accessible from the spiral staircase. The arched lintel of a former access bay attests to it, revealed on the ground floor during the redecorating of a shop in 2018. The ground level has thus been modified since the origins, which corresponds to the testimony of the Inventory Department made during the classification of the building in 1965. It is possible that this platform underwent other adjustments during the restructuring of the neighbourhood after the total demolition of the ramparts, since the levels of the neighbouring streets have been noticeably altered. The second basement opens onto the back courtyard and conserves the rustic appearance that it may have originally had: upper flooring with exposed joists, a dirt floor, ashlar cladding, with a basement window on the street side.

### The Kitchens and Other Domestic Areas

On the ground floor, dim lighting was diffused from the basement windows on the street side and opening broadly to facilitate the usage and aeration of the rooms. Traces of tearing in the interior cladding bear witness to the presence of large fireplaces in the rooms that have since disappeared, and denote the function of these rooms as a kitchen. Concerning the dedicated service floor (kitchen and scullery with access to the basements via a trapdoor<sup>22</sup>), no special effort seems to have been made in terms of decor. The plastered schist walls and the dressed-stone embrasures are simply painted in a bluish-grey and it is difficult to ascertain the date of the layout. In the nineteenth century, changing habits led to substantial modifications to the elevation on the street side, with the opening of large full windows, bringing generous light into this formerly dark space. The overall look of the ground floor was thus significantly changed.



<sup>20</sup> Cited by Paul Banéat, in BANÉAT, 1904, pp. 117-118.



The interior circulations of the building have not evolved greatly. The sole access to the upper floors is via the original spiral staircase, the veritable backbone of the *hôtel*. Since the main body of the house is simple in its depth, the bulk of the foot traffic on the upper floors occurs on the street side via a long series of double doors. Secondary hallways run parallel to the facade on the courtyard side.

The first floor is the noble level of the residence. Entirely covered in parquet flooring, it comprises three *salons* (parlours or living rooms) running parallel to the Rue Le Bastard and three service rooms on the courtyard side.

# The Antechamber

The first space visible from the hallway is the central living room, serving as an antechamber in the eighteenth century. Its decor and composition are thus the least spectacular of the three woodwork ensembles.

The elevations are made up of an alternation of panelling with large frames and Corinthian pilasters that support a cornice with modillions and dentels. The sculpted parts are concentrated on the areas above the doors, adorned with palmettes and little flowers, and entrelacs and plant motifs on the frieze that highlights all of the elevations.

**FIG.21** First floor of the Hôtel de Robien, northern elevation of the *Chambre de parade*.

<sup>21</sup> Building classification file, dated from 1 June 1965.

<sup>22</sup> Mentioned in the 1795 inventory.

The general composition of the decor does not seek symmetry at all cost, it is adapted to the existing constraints. The red marble fireplace (red of France or red of Maine), from the period of Louis XV, is placed in the centre of an asymmetrical elevation, between the double door of the hallway and a large moulded panel concealing a door behind a curtain. A sculpted glass framework, topped with an overmantel decorated with a cartouche once containing a crest, is framed by noncontemporaneous woodwork pilasters. Above, the cornice displays a surprising deformation of its profile, which is poorly suited to the current level of the ceiling. The ornamental vocabulary used for these decors is very similar to some ensembles preserved at the Hôtel de Molant<sup>23</sup> and the Parliament of Brittany. The frieze motifs and the crownings of lintels with hollowed channels are of the same calibre of production. Concerning the fireplaces, the examples that notably adorn the Hôtel de Molant are doubtless very similar to the one that existed at the Hôtel de Robien in this room. This woodwork is therefore contemporary to those of the parliament, possibly made by the same carpentry workshops in the years 1665 to 1675.24

As trends and habits evolved, the overall decor of the room underwent some transformations that did not alter the impression of unity of the whole. On the street side, the enlargement of the two eighteenth-century windows modified the height of the ceiling of the room as well as the design of the embrasures' panelling, comprising simple accompaniment panels.

Some of the details appear to demonstrate that the decor was not designed for this room. The access door from the staircase is poorly arranged within its elevation. The treatment of the corners of the room is asymmetrical (corner pilasters, cornice with one or two projections, pilasters juxtaposed in one corner). The panels of the eighteenth-century parquet floor around the fireplace are offcuts from Soubise or Chantilly panelling. Decorative wood panelling as well as a plaster cornice is visible above the cornice with modillions, probably the remains of a previous decor.

Nevertheless, some parts seem to have been designed for this room, notably the pilasters whose height coincides most opportunely with the lower face of the beam of the upper flooring. Consequently, this panelling has possibly been remounted, rather skilfully, in order to feign harmonious composition, but no definitive proof has been able to support this hypothesis. While this decor is potentially in its rightful place, what is certain is that the Régence period fireplace and glass overmantel are later additions. Their installation could have coincided with that of the decors of the adjoining rooms.

Reflecting his cabinet of curiosities, constituted by a patient accumulation of curious and unusual objects, the decor of the hôtel in Christophe-Paul's day comprised an accumulation of decorative woodwork from different periods and styles. It is therefore unsurprising to see salons of different periods juxtaposed.

The antechamber connects with the salon de compagnie (reception lounge) to the south by a double door, the sole access to this eighteenth-century salon.

# The Salon de Compagnie

The visitor enters a spacious salon d'apparat (state room) that originally enjoyed double exposure from both the street and courtyard sides (the only arrangement of its kind on this floor). Four large openings, oriented east-west, light up the room throughout the day. At first glance, the visitor is struck by the great homogeneity of the decorative woodwork, of exceptional quality.<sup>25</sup> This ensemble in rococo style is characteristic of the first half of the eighteenth century and is rather reminiscent of the production of the king's buildings at that time.

The major north and south elevations, in all points symmetrical, are composed around a glass overmantel with a sculpted and gilded frame. The high transom set on cross-bars is adorned with a mascaron featuring a woman's face. This composition framed by two sculpted high panels rests on a picture rail highlighting a decor of low panelling with sculpted frames. This ensemble is unified by a cornice that is also delicately sculpted, based on a series of finely worked consoles. On the street side, the double door leading to the salon has its equivalent on the elevation opposite. The latter, which actually conceals a closet, creates the illusion of an uninterrupted sequence of rooms.

The main original feature of the decor in the salon de compagnie is the exceptional series of vernis Martin (imitation lacquer) panels integrated within the woodwork, which are still in place and very well preserved.<sup>26</sup> The six 'tableaux' of the Hôtel de Robien represent peony and plant decorations on which multicoloured birds and butterflies stand out against a black background. The use of bright colours like green, red, and cobalt blue, occasionally enhanced with gold, is highly effective. These originals colours are not found in the production of traditional Chinese lacquers (from orangish red to dark brown, sometimes subsequently enhanced with gold), which demonstrates the expertise and stylistic freedom characteristic of European lacquerwork in the early eighteenth century.

These chinoiserie decors can be split into two families. The four sculpted and rectangular frames with clamps in the form of shells contain a composition of three superposed paintings. These panels are not mounted in their original position of interpretation.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the two oval-shaped transoms, surrounded by edging with gilded and polychrome designs, contain a rustic decor of plants, small birds, and insects all combined. The origin of these panels remains mysterious. Nevertheless, several ideas are under consideration to understand their presence within this

Christophe-Paul de Robien was an art lover who was passionate about objects of distant origins. Regularly travelling to Paris, he attended auctions or visited Parisian marchands-merciers (merchants of art objects) to acquire various artworks. Several objects from his collections, now conserved at the M usée des beaux-arts de Rennes, attest to this taste for Oriental objects and 'Chinoiseries'. Christophe-Paul notably had a particular taste for the Chinese lacquers that he decorated some of his furniture with.28

<sup>23</sup> The Hôtel de Molant, built in the seventeenth century in Rennes, still retained in the early twentieth century several fireplaces accompanied by their overmantels, whose composition was no doubt very similar to the one that existed at the Hôtel de Robien in the Grand Siècle.

<sup>24</sup> MUSSAT. 1961.

<sup>25</sup> Motifs with cross-bars, curves, and countercurves on the overmantel, form fireplaces, with arabesques adorning the extremities of the high panels.

**<sup>26</sup>** The panels were restored in 1975 following an 'aggressive' excavation of the wallpaper covering them.

<sup>27</sup> Some birds, in particular, have their beaks pointing towards the floor.

<sup>28</sup> Cabinet in lacquerwork from the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes, see Geneviève Lacambre, 'Coin Cabinets'.







The lacquerwork originating from the Orient, rare and very costly, had been particularly prized by wealthy European princes and aristocrats since the seventeenth century. This trend intensified in the first half of the eighteenth century, the period in which Chinese cabinets were flourishing in European palaces. Precious lacquerwork was thus integrated within the panelling, as in the Salon Vieux-Laque at the Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna or at the cabinet des chinoiseries of the Nymphenburg Palace in Munich, dating from the first half of the eighteenth century.

Christophe-Paul de Robien, as a man of the taste of his times who frequented expert *marchands-merciers* such as Edme-François Gersaint,<sup>29</sup> appreciated surrounding himself with these precious objects and intended to decorate the interiors of his





finest salons in accordance with Chinese taste. The Creating a complete decor around lacquerwork only seems to have been accessible to the wealthiest personages of Enlightenment Europe, and the fortune of President Robien, as imposing as it was, doubtless did not allow for such an investment. Yet Christophe-Paul was a resourceful character, who procured copies of Chinese lacquerwork, thus giving the illusion of a luxurious decor. We do not have the proof of an exchange between the parliamentarian and a specific marchand-mercier, the provider of these French panels of lacquerwork. However, a strong suspicion weighs on Edme-François Gersaint, who knew the curious collections of President Robien and who had a particular affinity for Chinese porcelains and lacquers. The provider of the curious collections of President Robien and who had a particular affinity for Chinese porcelains and lacquers.

Many examples of pieces of furniture largely identical to the French lacquerwork decors of the Hôtel de Robien were able to be identified in the course of my research. The comparison with other Chinese cabinets, in France and Europe, enabled striking similarities to be identified between the panels of the Hôtel de Robien and an Italian decor and to make an improbable discovery: the rectangular panels conserved at the Hôtel de Robien are almost perfect copies of the ones conserved in the Chinese cabinet of the Royal Palace of Turin. This lovely surprise was particularly interesting in that it enables the panels to be dated with a certain degree of precision. Indeed, the Turin lacquerwork was purchased in Rome in 1732 and the *vernis Martin* panels were

FIGS.22 to 25 Imitation lacquerwork (vernis Martin) of the Salon de compagnie, identical to that of the Chinese cabinet of the Royal Palace of Turin, 1730, decorated by Pietro Massa (active from 1721 to 1754).

<sup>29</sup> Edme-François Gersaint (1694-1750), a contemporary of Christophe-Paul de Robien, was a marchand-mercier regularly providing lacquerwork from China and Japan. He possibly met Christophe-Paul on the parliamentarian's frequent trips to Paris.

**<sup>30</sup>** As testified by the mentions 'panels in canvas painted in China' and 'panels in old Chinese lacquerwork', presented in the agreement of sale as national assets in the rooms of the first floor of the hotel.

**<sup>31</sup>** We do not have the absolute proof of a meeting between the two men, however, we do know that they frequented the same circle of collectors of curiosities (Gersaint was charged with establishing the catalogue of assets of Bonnier de la Mosson after his death in 1744, for the sale at auction of his precious natural history collections) and fans of chinoiseries. It is therefore entirely possible that the two individuals' objects were processed together, possibly even as regards the famous *vernis Martin* panels.

<sup>32</sup> Keck collection from La Lanterne, Bel Air, Los Angeles, California. It was partially sold by Sotheby's in New York on 5 and 6 December 1991.

commissioned to complete the decor of the Chinese cabinet in 1736.<sup>33</sup> As our panels are indeed directly inspired by these works, they would therefore date from 1735 to 1740, which would correspond to the post-fire renovation campaign undertaken for the interiors of the hôtel.

A more precise observation of this lacquerwork shows that we are in the presence of a veritable theatre set, which tricks visitors through the illusion of the uniqueness and hence the rarity of each work. By comparing the twelve rectangular panels, it must be concluded that they really only consist of three types of panel decor. Subtle variations in the colours of certain elements, as well as in the direction of placement, accentuate the illusion of being in the presence of so many different panels.

Like some of the decors of the antechamber, those of the *salon de compagnie* have undergone modifications.

The current fireplace, which does not fit either width-wise or height-wise in the position it occupies within the original panelling, replaced a rococo fireplace that was stylistically similar to that of the antechamber. It is likely that the latter was the former fireplace of the *salon de compagnie*. The dimensions and central clamp of the lintel, in the form of a shell, correspond perfectly to the ornaments of the room.

The framing of the overmantel between the two French windows opening onto the passageway on the courtyard side is a modern creation. The archives tell us that this room was once furnished with three fitted mirrors. Today only two are conserved in place. However, in 1795, this modern frame may have replaced a third composition of panelling, identical to the two elevations framing the mirrors. The dimensions correspond perfectly and it would be logical to have a mirror in this position that would reflect the light and accentuate the depth of the room by illusion. This hypothesis remains to be verified by sampling using polychromy research and deposits from the panelling.

A second access to the *salon de compagnie* became possible from the first half of the twentieth century, via a glass-walled gallery running along the façade on the courtyard side, and leading to the staircase turret, the service buildings, and the *salon de compagnie*.

### The Bedroom

From the antechamber, the visitor accesses the bedroom through a double door that faces the one opening onto the *salon de compagnie*. This room with alcoves, illuminated by two tall windows descending almost to the floor, reworks the ornamental theme of the *salon de compagnie*.

The two north and south elevations are composed around an overmantel of glass crowned with a full transom, with the whole structure framed by two high panels, the bases of which are sculpted with motifs of foliage, entrelacs, and cross-bars. A cornice sculpted in wood with hollow canal motifs and foliage highlights the room.

The door frames are particularly finely crafted. The window-cases are adorned with grotesques in basket-handle caning and floral bases, the upper beams are decorated with egg-and-dart patterns and ribbing. The doors are surmounted with ovoid transoms sculpted with entrelac motifs and framed with floral garlands, which are no longer decorated.





Opposite the windows, the alcove comprises an arched beam framed by two spandrels sculpted in arabesque motifs and with a central cartouche at its centre adorned with a mascaron. The arched transom is equipped on either side with two decorated panels with floral grotesques set against cross-bars. The lower panels are sculpted in an imposing vase brimming with flowers. As for the elevations of the interior of the alcove, they are very sparse: a lower panel was no doubt originally topped with taut fabric.

The original fireplace and its hearth in yellow marble from the Pyrenees (Brèche de Bénou or Sarrancolin) are characteristic of the rococo style. The wooden right angles of the mantelpiece are atypical, but their designs are coherent with those of the woodwork.

 $\ensuremath{ \mbox{FIG.26}}$  General view of the northern gable of the Hôtel de Robien.

In the revolutionary inventory, there is only mention of one mirror in this salon. However, two mirrors are in place today, according to a layout that is not entirely original. Indeed, the composition of the panelling imposes a second mirror opposite the mirror overmantel above the fireplace. The modern rectangular framing facing this sculpted overmantel attests to this. It is easy to note that the trace of the parquet floor of the original mirror is visible above the frame. It is impossible that, during the inventory, this mirror could have been forgotten, since mirrors were of a rarity that justified their cost. The origin of this dismantlement in the eighteenth century is unknown. While the beauty of the woodwork of the grand apartment of the Hôtel de Robien is now well established, doubts subsist, however, as to the original chromatic treatment of this ensemble. Through the cracks in the modern paintwork in the salon de compagnie, a few bursts of bright colour are perceptible (blue, very patchy red, gold). While these tints are original, the woodwork was most likely perfectly harmonised with the colours of the lacquerwork and gave this salon a fascinating radiance. In the bedroom, the panels 'à la capucine' were originally painted and occasionally gilded. The very patchy remains of the gildwork and patinas in the grooves of the mouldings attest to this, particularly in the doorframes. A campaign of stratigraphic surveys over the whole would shed full light on the overall aspect of this series of exceptional salons.

# The Apartments of the Second and Third Floors

Access to the second floor is achieved via the spiral staircase once again. The apartment that is deployed on this level comprises five rooms: a vestibule leading to four bedrooms including one adjacent to a small study. In the eighteenth century, this level was divided into three rooms, according to the same layout as on the first floor

The great disparity of styles and eras of the woodwork conserved contrasts starkly with the beautiful homogeneity of the panelling of the *piano nobile*. This shows the considerable changes made in the renovation of this floor over time. A split-level floor notably appears on photos from the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, as this second floor was only a domestic sleeping area, it was not designed for entertaining guests.

The woodwork, of mediocre quality on the whole, is almost the same in the first two rooms. The third retains a few high panels with ogee arches, characteristic of the 'standardised' production of the latter half of the eighteenth century. The best conserved elements are the double doors and transoms on the street side. From different periods, they are the remains of the old panelling from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Two fireplaces are preserved. One, in black marble from Sablé or Laval, is from the Louis XV period. The deposit on part of the panelling by the former owner has brought to light the old chimney duct and hearth of the southernmost room, above the *salon de compagnie*. These were originally positioned along the axis of the main elevation of the room; traces of former sidewalls are still visible on the interior cladding. This large, aligned fireplace, whose hearth was monumental (approximately 2.10 m) vanished at an unknown date.

Finally, we should note that this apartment is annexed by a small circular room in the watchtower, which can be accessed via a door under a drape. Inside, this space retains its original woodwork, a desk in the Mazarin style and curved shelving. It is entirely possible to imagine that this room was Christophe-Paul de Robien's study. Overlooking the street from his workspace (less than 5 m<sup>2</sup>), he could pride himself on being in direct contact with the moods of the city.

The third floor, containing two independent apartments (one in the main building, the other in the extensions) is not currently accessible.

### The Attics

Access to the last level is undertaken via the spiral staircase. The original volumetry is still legible despite the latter-day partitioning of this floor. The immediate impression is that of the rustic nature of the ensemble, despite certain details demonstrating the inhabitability of the space. Wood panelling and recycled parquet flooring form the partitioning of this floor, where traces of shelves are visible. It is uncertain whether this floor enjoyed a means of heating.

Christophe-Paul affirmed that he kept his library in the attic of his hôtel. Well lit by the huge stone and wood dormer windows distributed across all of the facades, this space occupying the entire surface of the hotel had to be favourable to undisturbed thought. Incidentally, note that four canvases by Jean Valette-Penot (1710–1777)<sup>34</sup> are said to represent some of the objects that once belonged to the collection of Christophe-Paul de Robien.<sup>35</sup> They show a certain rusticity in their display, since the elements are arranged on bookcases in bare wood. So, were the objects arranged in the attics of the hôtel, whose panelled vault would be suitable for a 'celestial' hanging of unusual objects?

### The Service Buildings

Juxtaposing the residence, the service buildings originally connected the noble areas only via the stairway. Direct communication is now possible between the residence and the domestic rooms on the courtyard side. On the first floor, a door fitted at the back of the bedroom allowed the creation of this connection, a modern arrangement, since in Christophe-Paul's day, the alcove must have housed a bed, placed opposite the windows. On the second floor, the modern arrangement of the woodwork establishes an access to reach the extension on the courtyard side.

It would appear that the rooms of the extensions allocated to domesticity, reconstructed after 1720, enjoyed a degree of comfort. A monumental fireplace, hidden behind an encasement, is still preserved on the first floor – proof that these areas were comfortably heated. Large windows divided into small squares open onto the small courtyard, letting light and air into the rooms. Moreover, it is remarkable that the facade on the courtyard side of a building that was meant to be temporary was adorned with moulded strips and sculpted brackets, ornaments that are currently being restored on the facades. A small turret of latrines adjoined this section, on the courtyard side.

The architectural arrangements of the Hôtel de Robien at the time of Christophe-Paul are therefore still perceptible in the current configuration, despite the many reworkings undertaken on the building since its construction. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine the distribution of President Robien's collection within a hôtel with dimensions that

**<sup>34</sup>** Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes, four trompes-l'œil: À la gravure de Sarrabat (794.1.139), H. 80 x L. 63 cm; À la médaille d'Anne de Bretagne, (794.1.140), H. 81.1 x L. 65.1 cm; À la statue d'Hercule (794.1.141), H. 79.5 x L. 63.5 cm; À la paire de pistolets (794.1.142), H. 100.5 x L. 82.2 cm.

**<sup>35</sup>** COULON, 2015 b, p. 47.

were still modest at the time of his death in 1756.36 Were they originally spread across all of the levels, even up in the attics?

The relatively modest surface area of each floor and the lack of space for elevation render the attempt to reconstitute the original layouts particularly difficult. In addition, none of the parliamentarian's contemporaries have described the spatial distribution of the collection within the Hôtel de Robien. It is, however, possible to imagine the organisation of part of his collection in his hotel, thanks to illustrations showing other cabinet of curiosities, contemporary to those of Christophe-Paul, in their original spatialisation.

Firstly, given the high quality of the panelling on the first floor of the Hôtel de Robien, it seems unlikely that the objects, books, and scientific instruments would have been displayed in this area. However, an etching by Jean-Baptiste Courtonne (1711–1781) representing Joseph Bonnier de la Mosson's cabinet, a contemporary of Christophe-Paul, shows the scenography of his collections, divided onto shelves resembling exotic plants (palm trees, ferns) in salons featuring panelled decors. This way of arranging salons d'apparat shows that the collections, as unusual as they were, could absolutely be adapted to prestigious decors. It is therefore not out of the question that the first floor of the Hôtel de Robien was home to a large number of objects, for the great delight of its visitors. The attic space is also an interesting volume for presenting books, which seems to have been the case.

The question of the distribution of the collections within the familial *hôtel* thus remains open, all the more so in that this collection was clearly enhanced by the president's son, Paul-Christophe-Céleste.

# Conclusion

The Hôtel de Robien, the jewel of Rennes' heritage, has gradually slumbered for several years now. As a result of its history, it has been shared between various owners, which distanced it somewhat from its initial vocation as a familial home in the heart of the city.

The architectural and heritage report currently underway demonstrates the feasibility of a project combining the restoration of the woodwork decors and the design of spaces arranged in a resolutely contemporary manner. The partitions reported following the revolutionary division of the *hôtel* have been identified and can be removed, their lack of heritage value renders the restitution of the original volumes of the *hôtel particulier* a clear priority.

It is not unreasonable to imagine that, in the near future, these wonderful interior decors and this beautiful *hôtel particulier*, emblematic of the heart of Rennes, will be restored and once again showcased through a renovation project respectful of the site, bringing the Hôtel de Robien into the twenty-first century with dignity.

# THE ZOOLOGY COLLECTIONS

FIG.27 Ophiuride (Gorgonocephalus caputmedusae, Linnaeus, 1758), North Atlantic; Ø 28 cm (unframed), the Robien Collection, drawing in Robien's manuscript Description historique de son cabinet. ca. 1740, pl. 113 (Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, MS 0546); Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (D. 2012.2.2): stored at the Muséum d'histoire naturelle de l'université de Rennes 1 (000352).

I wish to start by giving a broad outline of my personal journey so that readers can best understand the spirit in which I present my observations. Just as each collector expresses themselves through their collection, I have chosen to accompany my presentation of Christophe-Paul de Robien's (1698-1756) zoological collections with considerations inspired by my own path and my work on these objects. I spent my childhood in the countryside and grew up in a family of biologists, and from an early age, developed a real passion for flora and fauna. My frequent excursions out of doors, as well as a vast library, enabled me to acquire a solid grounding in knowledge of the natural world. These interests soon led me to discover photography and learn various techniques for preserving specimens (methods for conserving insects, taxidermy, the use of herbariums), but also to try my hand at raising various animals. Over the years, and from the age of eight, I developed a spirit of enquiry, particularly due to numerous trips abroad, where I discovered exotic ecosystems, but also different cultures (Indonesian, Ecuadorian, etc.), languages (English, Spanish, Indonesian), and ways of life (especially in New Guinea). With time, my desire to learn more only grew greater: I became interested in biological sciences as well as ethnology, sociology, philosophy, and so on. In 2008 I became assistant manager of the zoology collection at the University of Rennes I, where I have been teaching since 2012. I carry out a variety of activities, from the conservation and restoration of a scientific heritage to fostering its legacy through teaching. I am genuinely attached to this scientific heritage; it is a constant source of joy to be entrusted with its care. The way in which I bring value to these collections is by transmitting knowledge (scientific, historic, etc.) to various audiences, and I am grateful that this article presents me with the opportunity to carry this out. I consider this mission to be one of the most worthwhile that exists. My profession is totally aligned with my personal values, and it holds an important place in my life. And so, it was with great pleasure that I agreed to participate in this catalogue, with all the more enthusiasm given the great freedom I have had in selecting the content of my contribution.



# SÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE RENNES•JANVIER 2021

# From revolutionary Confiscation to University Collection: An Eventful History

Christophe-Paul de Robien's handwritten manuscript<sup>1</sup> does not give precise quantities, but according to the inventory drawn up in 1794 by Quéru de la Coste (1742-1804), his cabinet contained 7,910 natural history specimens, among which 2,110 are related to zoology.<sup>2</sup> His collections, which became public assets during the Revolution, provided the basis for the Muséum d'Histoire naturelle et des arts, which opened in Rennes in 1798.3 Over time, the museum's collections were expanded and moved to different locations. In 1839-1840, with the creation of the faculty of sciences in Rennes, one part of the museum's collections was allocated to the faculty in order to provide the basis for a teaching collection. These two collections were thus conserved and added to separately over a period of decades. From 1860 to 1894, however, collections from the three faculties (arts. law, and science), the school of medicine, and the various museums (which were all housed in the university palace) were merged. Several moves also later took place, in particular that of the geology collection in 1938, which was transferred to a new building: the institute of geology. In August 1944, as the university palace had been severely damaged during the war, the municipal collections were stored at the science faculty, thus joining the other part of the collections. In 1957, the university palace was renovated into the Musée des beaux-arts, which still conserves and exhibits the art section of Robien's collections. In 1967, the science faculty moved to the Beaulieu campus, where the University of Rennes I today safeguards the majority of what remains of Robien's naturalist collections

### **Problems with Conservation**

This eventful history has taken its toll on the zoology collections belonging to Robien, the parliamentarian from Rennes. First of all, the multiple moves and the occasionally poor storage conditions very probably led to the loss of numerous specimens. Secondly, the re-labelling of specimens by successive curators resulted in an irreversible loss of information. Today, it is extremely difficult to say which specimens stored at the University of Rennes I actually come from Robien's collections. Especially as the catalogue of his collection is primarily illustrated with etchings from other works, such as that of Georg Everhard Rumphius (1627–1702),<sup>4</sup> as is the case with the shells, for example. Based on our current understanding, we must therefore be satisfied with suppositions. Consequently, for this section and in order to convey the rich diversity of the zoological groups, their geographical origins, and the types of preservation, I have selected, from among the one hundred and fifty thousand zoology specimens stored at the University of Rennes, ones that match those described by Robien in his catalogue. In fact, most of these do not come from his collections.

In general, Robien only kept the parts of the animals that he described in his manuscript.<sup>5</sup> Only a few of the specimens were preserved in their entirety, in particular shells and insects. According to the inventory prepared by Quéru in 1794,<sup>6</sup> most of these animal parts were preserved in jars, that is, immersed in a generally

- **1** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1.
- **2** QUÉRU DE LA COSTE, 1794; AUBERT, 2001 a, p. 198.
- **3** HOULBERT, 1933, p. 56; RICHARD, 2010, pp. 65-71.
- 4 RUMPHIUS 1705
- **5** AUBERT, 2001 a, p. 143.
- 6 QUÉRU DE LA COSTE, 1794.

alcohol-based preserving fluid, while others, such as horns, teeth, and certain skins, were kept dry. There are, however, some specimens that have been preserved whole and some complete skeletons. In 1794, Quéru had already noted that 'the birds [...] were very old and in poor condition, except for the bird of paradise: 7 The preservation of zoological specimens is itself difficult, as they can be eaten by different insect species and altered by humidity, which allows mould to form, as well as by light or changes in temperature. Because of the various moves, only the most durable specimens and parts of specimens have survived up until today: shells, teeth, bones, etc.

# **Incomplete Geographical Origins**

According to Gauthier Aubert's study,8 the origins of more than half the natural history specimens are not indicated in Robien's manuscript. This is an unfortunate gap, as in order for a collection to have scientific value, the origin must be included. When a collection is being created for scientific reference, the precise date and location that the specimen was gathered is a condition for future study. The three main origins mentioned by Robien are the East Indies (9.8%), followed by France (9.6%), and Europe (9.3%). Brittany only accounts for 7.5%, a similar proportion to specimens noted as coming from the Americas (6.9%). Finally, only 3% are described as coming from Sub-Saharan Africa and 2.4% from overseas. As Gauthier Aubert indicates, this split probably reflects the activity of the merchants that Robien frequented. In addition to purchases, donations, and exchange, Robien collected some specimens himself. Throughout his manuscript, he mentions collecting shells, fish, and butterflies.9 And finally, Robien had raised exotic animals since childhood. One example is an agouti from America, 'perfectly tame that sometimes slept with me'. In his manuscript, he also mentions 'Bengal dogs, a species that I have been conserving and perpetuating for a number of years' and even a female lion, 'so gentle and docile that she played and let my children touch her'. He later presented this lioness to King Louis XV (1710–1774), 'to be added to his menagerie'. This proximity to exotic animals reveals his attachment to them, especially when he mentions his cats: 'Of all these animals, the one I most regret is the tamed tiger cat that came from Sengal and died two years ago, and whose stuffed coat I still keep'. 13 As well as exotic animals, Robien kept local butterflies and was familiar with their reproduction cycles and the specific plants they ate; this explains the relatively large number of Breton butterflies present in his collection.14

# An Issue with Classification

According to the inventory drawn up by Quéru, Robien's cabinet of curiosities included 1,500 shells, 300 insects, 100 mammals, 80 birds, 70 fish, and 60 reptiles. Robien himself also mentions the presence of 65 crustaceans and 17 'monsters'. He attached

- 7 Ibid
- **8** AUBERT, 2001 a, p. 184. **9** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1.
- 10 Ibid., f. 403.
- 11 Ibid., f. 412.
- **12** Ibid., f. 414.
- **13** Ibid., f. 412.
- **14** AUBERT, 2001 a, p. 190.
- **15** QUÉRU DE LA COSTE, 1794; AUBERT, 2001 a, p. 198.

considerable importance to the organisation of his collections, writing: 'We see those who have many collections of rocks, shells, minerals, plants, which they display in profusion, but without any order. A rich diversity collected at much cost, but with so little taste and intelligence, is this suited to enlightening the mind?" Although Quéru's inventory shows that not all of Robiens' cabinet was perfectly ordered, the general categories were broadly grouped together. Aside from possible issues of space and methods of preservation that may have restricted his spatial organisation, it is worth noting that at the time of the inventory, Christophe-Paul de Robien had been dead for thirty-eight years. Reorganisations, especially by his son Paul-Christophe, may have been implemented during the interval. Be that as it may, the manuscript allows us to recreate the organisation that Robien felt was ideal. Here is the plan he gave to his manuscript: 'I will divide this work into four general categories: 1st the fossils, 2nd the plants, 3rd the animals, 4th the various works of art. Each general category will be subdivided into various classes, genus, and particular species. Beginning with the least precious and gradually moving towards the most precious and from least perfect to most perfect, following little by little the degrees of perfection.'17 We can observe a relatively well-organised, although linear classification based on a set of values that led Robien to begin the animal section with 'univalves' and end it with 'human and unnatural figures'. 19 We should also note that after having evoked the huge diversity of animals, he decided to divide them into 'two general classes: primo inhabitants of the sea, secundo those of the air and earth'. Finally, as far as land animals were concerned, he specified: 'I think I should begin the group of land animals with the smallest and most delicate and move successively to the largest:21 Mixing as it does criteria of morphology, environment, and values, the classification system used by Robien is quite eclectic. On the whole, it was an organisation common at a time that, as we must remember, was fixist (scientists believed that species did not evolve) and deeply influenced by Christianity, which placed humankind at the apex. Robien was a contemporary of Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), and in his library he had at least one of his books on plants (Genera Plantarum<sup>22</sup>). He also referred to other renowned authors such as Réaumur (1683–1757), in particular on the subject of insects.

Robien was anxious to categorise his collections in a scientific manner, even if, as we shall see, he referred in some cases to outdated authors whose works at the time had already been refuted. We must also remember that the classification of living things has greatly evolved since Robien's time. The work of Lamarck (1744–1829), who developed the idea that species are transformed over time (transformism), and then Darwin (1809–1882), who outlined the key principles of the evolution of living beings, resulted in considerable disruption to established thought. These two thinkers founded a vision of the living world that was no longer fixist but genealogical, rooted in deep time. These major advances in the field of biology established a new objective for classifications, which were now to group together species based on indications of a common genealogical ancestor. As research progressed, a true phylogenesis had

**16** ROBIEN, 1751, p. vi.

**17** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 1.

**18** Ibid., f. 161.

**19** Ibid., f. 419.

**20** Ibid., f. 158.

**21** Ibid., f. 300. **22** ROBIEN, 1749, f. 24.

to be developed, based only on present characteristics. This phylogenesis, entirely secularised, enabled relationships to be drawn between different species (not in the sense of direct progeny, but that of a relative degree of relationship), by way of diagrams resembling a tree, or to be more precise, a bush. These phylogenetic trees were a scientific recreation of the history of living things; their branches connected hypothetical ancestors to identified species (current and fossil) placed at either end. In today's phylogenetic classification, each group or taxon is thus based on the exclusive relationship between its members, resulting from the study of shared characteristics. Humans are just one species among others, and methodologically speaking, can no longer be used as a reference. The production of a tree displaying groups created on the basis of characteristics identified *a priori*, such as the absence of an internal skeleton, has no basis in science and is no longer a valid method. Similarly, living environments (land, sea, etc.) or means of locomotion (flight, swimming, etc.) are not criteria that enable filiation to be attributed, and are thus not valid criteria for classifying groups.<sup>23</sup>

# An Outdated System of Nomenclature

As we will see, the names that Robien used to designate those species of which he preserved one or several specimens was based on the Tournefort system, <sup>24</sup> which is no longer used. Today each species has a unique binomial name determined by the zoological nomenclature code. This international nomenclature was introduced with the tenth edition of the *Systema Naturae* published by Linnaeus in 1758. A precise description of characteristics (diagnosis) is given for each species, and one or several model specimens are designated and stored in a research collection (often within museums). These reference specimens may be completed with collections of tissue, DNA, photographs, etc. They are 'nomen-bearers' and do not represent the diversity that exists within their species. Species are themselves categories that we have defined by observing natural barriers to reproduction between individuals.<sup>25</sup> The 'species' category allows us to group together a collection of individuals that may interbreed, but we should not forget the diversity represented within it.<sup>26</sup>

# Fascinating Collections: Some Specimens Chosen from Robien's Manuscript Cowry shells: FIG. 28 and manuscript<sup>27</sup>

Among the many shells conserved by Robien, I have chosen to present a species that he wisely classified among the 'Porcellaines', or cowry shells. The common name porcelaine is still used in French today to designate species in the Cypraeidae family, which includes more than 250 species of marine gastropods. These species are and have always been greatly appreciated by collectors due to the beauty of their shells. When they are active, cowries have a particular appearance, as their shell is covered by their mantle (the part of the molluse's anatomy that secretes the shell or other calcareous formations). The origins of the French name porcelaine go back to 1298, when Marco Polo used it for the first time to designate these shells, which he had

<sup>23</sup> LECOINTRE, 2017; LECOINTRE 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Robien owned several books by Joseph Pitton de Tournefort (1656–1708), including TOURNEFORT, 1694.

**<sup>25</sup>** LECOINTRE, 2014.

**<sup>26</sup>** RIDE 1999

<sup>27</sup> ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 226 and plate 95.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., f. 224.





FIG.28

FIG.28 Cauris (Monetaria moneta, Linnaeus, 1758), Indo-Pacific zone, Hao, Tuamotu; 1.3 x 2.5 x 2 cm (left), 1.2 x 2.4 x 1.9 cm (right); drawing in Robien's manuscript, ca. 1740, pl. 95 (Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, MS 0546); former collection of René Le Gemble (1923–2009); Muséum d'histoire naturelle de l'université de Rennes 1 (004078 and 004077).

discovered in China. It derives from the Latin *porcella*, which means 'little sow', as these shells are said to resemble the genital organs of a sow.<sup>29</sup> However, Robien also used a much more poetic synonym to name them: 'Shells of Venus'. He further noted that they were called 'bouge' or 'cauris'.<sup>30</sup> The first term was the name given to them in Guinea and came from the Portuguese word *boughi*. The second, 'cauri', still used today, is a French word that comes from the Hindu *kauri* (originally from the Sanksrit *Kaparda*). Contrary to a widespread notion shared by Robien, it was only later that certain types of pottery began to be called 'porcelain', referring to the shiny appearance of the 'porcelain' shells.

Among the thirty or so species that Robien describes, one of them was of particular interest to me. Today named *Monetaria annulus*, <sup>31</sup> it is described in the manuscript as *Rumphius thoracium quartum*. <sup>32</sup> Robien also adds that it is an example of 'Bonani no. 233', which in fact corresponds to another species: *Monetaria moneta*. <sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the illustration present in Robien's manuscript <sup>34</sup> comes from Rumphius's book, which describes the specimen under the name of *Thoracium vulgare* or *Cauricium*, <sup>35</sup> which corresponds to the species *Monetaria moneta*. Robien apparently made an error in identification, and it must actually have been the money-cowry (*Monetaria moneta*). Having said that, the mistake is quite understandable, given the number of species in this family, the variability within the species, and the lack of reliable books enabling identification at the time.

Robien notes that this cowry was 'used as currency in Guinea', and Quéru lists it under the term 'Currency from Guinea' in his inventory. These two cowries, which live in the Indo-Pacific zone, were used (and in some places are still used) as currency, which is where the term 'money-cowry' comes from. This currency was once even the most widespread in the world. Archaeological research carried out in China demonstrates that the use of cowries goes back to the Neolithic period and that their

- **29** CNRS, 2018.
- **30** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 226.
- **31** LINNAEUS, 1758.
- 32 ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 226.
- **33** LINNAEUS, 1758; LINCK, 1783, p. 144.
- 34 ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, plate 95
- **35** RUMPHIUS, 1711, illustration: plate XXXIX-c and text p. 8.
- **36** QUÉRU DE LA COSTE, 1794.

use as a ritual form of exchange dates to approximately the thirteenth century BC. It has been used as a form of currency since the ninth century BC. Having said that, within the framework of these studies, it is difficult to distinguish between its use as an adornment or ritualistic object and that of a form of currency. We do know that Papuans today use string cowries on a cord, forming a sort of bundle of cowries. Furthermore, specialists in numismatics have a very strict sense of what money is, which is sometimes inapplicable to ethnic groups where the symbolic and social value are most often inseparable from cowries themselves. This currency spread across many countries in Asia and parts of Europe and Africa. A gathering industry developed in the Maldives from the ninth century. Later on, from the sixteenth century onwards, European colonists imported thousands of tonnes of cowries a year by boat, in order to purchase slaves in Africa (especially in Guinea where one slave was worth approximately ten kilograms of cowries). This terrible traffic in humans would last until the nineteenth century.

Robien also mentions a small cowry that is 'well-known among the savages of America [...], who use it to decorate their belts and bracelets'. As far as we know today, cowries had a purely ornamental function for ethnic groups in America before the arrival of European colonists. The latter did, however, import them to trade for animal furs. Over time, this meant that cowries became devalued wherever colonists had been. To give a more recent example, in New Guinea, in 1957, Christian missionaries paid local people one cowry for a day of work, two cowries in 1961, and in 1967, some people began to refuse to work for cowries. Certain ethnic groups distinguished between *Tuanikae mege*, cowries brought in by white people, and *Kawane*, local cowries. It is interesting to note that the value of a cowry in New Guinea depends on its size, colour, and patina, but also the social position of the transaction partners.

The study of the presence of certain shells in certain locations is not only associated with biology, but also domains such as ethnology, history, and economics. In addition to studies relating to the use of cowries as currency, these domains have also allowed ancient paths of human migration to be examined. I do hope that this overview will be sufficient to arouse the curiosity of those walking along beaches here and elsewhere. <sup>44</sup>

# Horseshoe crabs: FIG. 29 and manuscript<sup>45</sup>

Robien began the presentation of his 'third section of crustaceans with mobile and split plates' by explaining that these are animals 'that more than any other we could justifiably call Sea Insects, because their carapace or shell is split by a large number of incisions covered with closed and flexible membranes that as these various sections slide across one another, just like different land-based insects, cause movement.'46 This is a very perceptive observation, which, accompanied by other elements, will later allow numerous taxons, including insects and crustaceans, to be grouped

- **37** LI, 2003.
- **38** PÉTREQUIN, 2006.
- **39** QUIGGIN, 1949, pp. 25-36; DICTIONNAIRE PORTATIF, 1770, p. 504.
- **40** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 228.
- **41** PÉTREQUIN, 2006, p. 151.
- **42** Ibid., p. 158.
- **43** Ibid., p. 156.
- **44** JACKSON, 1917, pp. 123–194.
- **45** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 279–280 and plate 17.
- **46** Ibid., f. 275.



together within Euarthropoda, as they all have the same segmented exoskeleton with articulated parts. The last crab that he describes is not actually a crab. It is a member of the species 'known as Rumphius [...] cancer perversus', 47 that today is called *Tachypleus* gigas (MÜLLER, 1785),48 that is, one of the four extant species of horseshoe crabs. The first person to publish the description of a horseshoe crab accompanied with a drawing was Charles de l'Écluse (1526-1609), in 1605.49 He was cited and corrected by several authors including Ole Worm (1588–1654), who Robien referred to, specifying that he called it 'Cancer des Moluques, because it can be found on its shores.' This species does indeed live in the Indo-Pacific zone. Although Robien presented it after other species of crabs, he did note that it had 'a structure quite different to the previous examples.'50 Horseshoe crabs are not actually crustaceans like crabs, but are chelicerates, because they have a pair of chelicerae, like spiders and scorpions, to mention but two examples. It is interesting to note that Rumphius explains that they are also called sea spiders.<sup>51</sup> This prompts me to draw attention to a common, yet false assertion regarding horseshoe crabs. You may sometimes read in articles for lay people that horseshoe crabs are 'primitive animals', 'living fossils', or that the animal has 'barely evolved since it appeared', or even that it 'has not evolved'. These are erroneous transcriptions from scientific studies that require qualitative criteria. In fact, every current living species, without exception, has evolved, in the sense that all lines of living things have been around for a comparable amount of time since the origin of life. Living things are continually changing, and even though these transformations may seem minimal from a morphological point of view, modifications at the level of genomes have indeed taken place. 52 These different lines all have evolving trajectories.

Humans have used the four species of horseshoe crab (one American and three Asian) in many different domains. From the middle of the nineteenth to the midtwentieth centuries, horseshoe crabs were harvested in the United States for use as a soil fertiliser, to the tune of five million individuals a year.<sup>53</sup> Then, after several years of study, two American researchers, Frederik Bang and Jack Levin, discovered in 1964 that the haemolymph (the equivalent of blood in invertebrates) in American horseshoe crabs (Limulus polyphemus, Linnaeus, 1758) coagulates when in the presence of endotoxins.<sup>54</sup> Endotoxins form part of the wall of gram-negative bacteria (such as Escherichia coli, for example), which can cause reactions such as septic shock or fever when they enter our organisms. Incidentally, horseshoe crab haemolymph is blue due to the presence of hemocyanin, a protein that carries oxygen through their blood, and that unlike our haemoglobin, does not contain iron but copper. A few years later, these researchers discovered that the coagulation was connected to the presence of mobile cells called amoebocytes. In 1977, after multiple laboratory tests, American authorities authorised the use of extracted horseshoe crab haemolymph, called Limulus amebocyte lysate (LAL), in pharmacological tests on veterinary and human medications. This use then spread across the globe, as the previously used tests

FIG.29 Horseshoe crab (*Limulus polyphemus*, Gronovius, 1764), Atlantic coasts of North America; 20.5 x 11 cm; the Robien Collection (?), drawing in Robien's manuscript *Description historique de son cabinet*, ca. 1740, pl. 117 (Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, MS 0546); Muséum d'histoire naturelle de l'université de Rennes 1 (000993).

**<sup>47</sup>** Ibid., f. 279.

**<sup>48</sup>** SDUK, 1843, p. 632.

**<sup>49</sup>** L'ECLUSE, 1605, pp. 127-129.

**<sup>50</sup>** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 279.

**<sup>51</sup>** RUMPHIUS, 1999, illustration p. 47, plate XII – Fol. 22 and text pp. 46-48 and pp. 403-404.

**<sup>52</sup>** LECOINTRE 2014

**<sup>53</sup>** SMITH, 2017.

**<sup>54</sup>** BANG, 1973.



FIG.30 Narwhal tooth (Monodon monoceros, Linnaeus, 1758), North Atlantic; 198 x 5.5 cm; the Robien Collection, drawing in Robien's manuscript Description historique de son cabinet, ca. 1740, pl. 122 (Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, MS 0546); Muséum d'histoire naturelle de l'université de Rennes 1 (004024).

required much more time. Similar tests (TAL or Tachypleus amebocyte lysate) were developed from the haemolymph of other horseshoe crab species. Currently, the test is used to detect the absence of endotoxins in injectable preparations and protheses. In the United States, several hundreds of thousands of horseshoe crabs are harvested every year (more than five hundred thousand in 2014) and then released after 30% of their haemolymph has been extracted. But almost 15% of these horseshoe crabs, that is, more than seventy thousand, die after their release.55 The population levels of these four species of horseshoe crab are cause for concern, especially as in some Asian countries they are consumed as food, as well as being used as fish bait. In 1998, in the United States, three million horseshoe crab were taken from along the Atlantic coast. Protection measures have since been put in place, and the number harvested has dropped to seven hundred thousand.<sup>56</sup> But conservation measures for the three Asian species require cooperation between several countries and are more difficult to put in place. The American species is listed by the International Union for the Conservation of Animals (IUCN) as vulnerable, while the three Asian species are listed as having 'insufficient data'.57,58

# The narwhal: FIG. 30 and manuscript<sup>59</sup>

The narwhal is perhaps the ultimate mythical animal. Also known as the Unicorn of the Sea, Quéru's inventory reveals that a 'portion of Unicorn tooth' was found in Robien's cabinet of curiosities. At the time, this was a highly sought-after (especially because of its supposed therapeutic properties) and very expensive object. Some authors estimate that in the past its value was equivalent to that of a castle. Based on the archives we have available, the narwhal tooth preserved at the University of Rennes I is the very specimen that Robien added to his collection, because we have no trace of a later acquisition by the city or the science faculty. Robien classed the

**55** SMITH, 2017.

**56** Ibid.

57 IUCN, 2018. In order to protect horseshoe crab populations, scientists are currently testing effective alternative methods for detecting endotoxins, but this research is time-consuming and expensive. It should be noted that scientific research is today largely integrated into the economic system and that yearly revenue from the use of horseshoe crabs in the American biomedical industry is estimated at around \$220 million dollars a year (see OKUN, 2012).

**58** NOVITSKY, 2009

**59** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 296 and plate 122.

**60** MCLEISH, 2013.

narwhal as a fish whose 'skin is almost bony or calloused' and describes it as follows: 'The Narssal fish, or Unicorn of the Sea, is a large fish that some believe to be a type of whale [...] this marine monster has a white, heavy, shiny horn at the end of its nose that forms a spiral. The horns can be of different sizes and weights and were thought to be the horns of unicorns.'62 Robien is therefore reasonably well informed on the subject, because the attribution of 'unicorn horns' to a sea animal was only confirmed in 1652 by Nicolaes Tulp (1593-1674) in Observationes medicae. 63 This author began his chapter on the Unicornu marinum: 'We could engage in interminable discussions about the existence of the unicorn, to which the Holy Books attribute indomitable courage and their precious horn, it is easy to say without risk of contradiction that nearly all the horns kept by great men of the Earth do not belong to a land animal, but to a large marine animal.'64 After the observation that a 'cadaver of this fish had been found 9 June 1648 in the North Sea', Tulp noted that it had 'two holes through which the monster blew out water, as do the other whales.'65 Having said that, neither Robien nor Tulp seriously doubted the existence of the unicorn, which remained a mythical animal even if the collected 'horns' were firmly identified as being from the narwhal. This can be explained on one hand by the fact that the legend of the unicorn was very old - the first historic reference can be attributed to Ctesias (fourth century BC)66 - and on the other hand by the fact that the unicorn is mentioned in several translations of the Bible and the Talmud, which gave the legend a religious connotation.<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in ancient texts, the unicorn is designated by various terms, such as *monoceros* (which mean 'single horn' in Greek) and *monodon* (which means 'single tooth' in Greek). These names were perpetuated by Linnaeus when he described the narwhal in 1758, because he named it *Monodon monceros*. Inspired by the works of John Ray (1627–1705) and Bernard de Jussieu (1699–1777), Linnaeus classified it as a *Mammal*, in the Cete family, which means 'whale' in Greek and is the root of the word Cetacea. The narwhal is indeed a marine mammal classed among toothed cetaceans (odontocetes). Contrary to Tulp's observations, however, odontocetes only have one nostril, or blowhole, while baleen whales (Mysticeti) have two. Within the whale family, the narwhal is the only species with a tusk. It is, in fact, a tooth that generally only develops in males and that can reach a length of three metres. In very rare cases, some males have been observed with two developed tusks and females with a small tusk. This tusk, when it is present, is the narwhals' only developed tooth. They use it to harpoon their prey and feed with it.<sup>68,69</sup>

Robien explains that this tusk is 'used to attack larger whales'. This is not true, but its function has been subject to many hypotheses. For example, it was thought that the narwhal used its tusk to break ice or pierce the hulls of boats. However, most researchers believe that males use it to establish hierarchical status, and sometimes to fight during the mating season. Some males have scars that could have come from

**61** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 290.

**62** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 296.

**63** TULP, 1652; SAVARE, 1972.

**64** SAVARE, 1972, p. 182.

**65** Ibid., p. 183.

**66** Ibid.

**67** QUÉRU DE LA COSTE, 1794

**68** WILSON, 2014, pp. 394-408.

**69** LINNAEUS, 1758, p. 75.

**70** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 296.

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such fights; the tip of a tusk was once found implanted in the skull of a male. Males have also been observed crossing their tusks at the surface of the water, but these interactions are considered non-aggressive. 71 Studying the behaviour of narwhals in their natural environment is difficult because they live in Arctic zones and are naturally timid creatures. Robien was aware of their geographic distribution, because he wrote that they 'can be found in great numbers in cold seas and the North Sea'. The use of drones, a technique that is developing fast, mitigates the difficulties in studying them directly. Another hypothesis, developed by Martin T. Nweeia at the Harvard School of Dental Medicine, discusses the sensitive nature of this tooth.<sup>72</sup> Miniscule tubules cross through the tooth from the outside to the inner pulp, which is highly innervated tissue. Nweeia and his team observed that narwhals' sensitivity to the water's salinity could be connected to this curious structure, but the study is based on only six individuals and would need further data. It would be interesting, for example, to know whether this tusk, which is primarily present in males, plays a role in detecting females during the mating season (via the detection of pheromones). There is scope for many more studies on the social behaviour of this species. Alongside visual observations, studies in bioacoustics have provided much useful information about narwhal communication and their use of echolocation. A study published in 2016<sup>73</sup> indicates that narwhals have the most directional sonar known in the animal world. As research progresses, scientists continue to bring us increasingly comprehensive and objective knowledge about narwhals. We will always have new data to gather through observation, and that is why for me, science is so fascinating: the horizon never grows smaller. Given the amount of written material, specimens, and notes that he gathered, Robien was most certainly driven by the same inextinguishable thirst for knowledge.

# Insects: FIG. 31 and manuscript<sup>74</sup>

If we are to believe his scientific references and his raising of animals, insects held a special interest for Robien, but here I will only speak about them generally. In his introduction to this group, he wisely remarked: 'All the small animals whose extreme smallness seems to permit the scorn of the unlearned are not endowed with an organisation less perfect and less regular in their entirety than animals of the largest and rarest species.<sup>75</sup> Note that here he contradicts the scale of values that he presented in the introduction to his manuscript. He described insects with passion, especially butterflies, of which he raised several species and was familiar with their different stages of development: 'These insects, whose almost infinite diversity multiplies even further their varieties by the changes in state they go through before accomplishing their complete metamorphosis, or after having spent more or less time, depending on the species, as a chrysalid, suddenly change into flying insects." Robien describes several attempts at raising caterpillars on different plants, for example: 'A large caterpillar [...] of which I have raised several in the countryside, feeding them with Solanum

FIG.31 Christophe-Paul de Robien, Description historique, topographique et naturelle de l'ancienne

Armorique; différentes espèces de chenilles et de papillons; faune et flore de Bretagne, prior to 1756,

pl. III-4; paper, graphite pencil, and watercolour,

Rennes - Métropole (MS 0312).

46 x 29 cm; the author indicates that he had raised all these butterfies; Bibliothèque des Champs Libres,

<sup>71</sup> WILSON, 2014.

**<sup>73</sup>** KOBLITZ, 2016.

**<sup>76</sup>** Ibid., f. 1.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., f. 301.

**<sup>72</sup>** NWEEIA, 2014.

**<sup>74</sup>** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 300-350.

**<sup>75</sup>** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 300.

FIG.32 Lesser bird-of-paradise (*Paradisaea minor*, Shaw, 1809), Papua New Guinea;  $48 \times 35 \times 20$  cm; drawing in Robien's manscript *Description historique de son cabinet*, ca. 1740, pl. 139 (Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, MS 0546); former collection of Achille Raffray (1844–1923); donated in 1876 to the Muséum d'histoire naturelle de l'université de Rennes 1 (002460).

mortiferum. Which they prefer to that of Jasmine, which M. de Réaumur feeds his. 79 He followed the classification proposed by Réaumur and owned volume I of Réaumur's Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des Insectes – sur les chenilles et sur les papillons published in 1734.80 Robien paid close attention to scientific publications relating to his collections. He specified, for example, that butterflies 'unfold according to M. de Réaumur into three general types or into seven classes.'81 We should dwell a little here on the work of Réaumur, who in addition to his numerous discoveries, enabled the development of a medium vital to the dissemination of knowledge: cardboard. While in China people had been using paper made solely with plant fibres, 82 the paper produced and used in Europe for hundreds of years was 'rag paper' made from used fabric, shredded in mills. In the early eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment, Réaumur, who was a mathematician, biologist, and physician (among other things) noticed that the quantity of used fabric was not increasing sufficiently to cover the growing consumption of paper. He was a fan of insects, and from his window he used to watch wasps collecting wood to make their nest. Unlike bees, wasps do not have glands that produce wax, and they make their nest with a combination of chewed wood fibres and saliva. Réaumur came up with the idea of developing a new formulation for paper pulp using chipped and recomposed wood: this was the origin for the 'cardboard' we still use today. In 1719, Réaumur wrote: 'All of them [the wasps] show us that we can make paper from the fibre of plants without having to process them first as fabric and rags; they seem to invite us to try and see if we cannot make beautiful and good paper by directly using certain species of trees. [...] This is an area of study not to be neglected; I would even go so far as to say it is important. Rags, with which we make our paper, are not a material we usually elevate, yet master stationers know only too well that it is an increasingly rare material. Paper consumption grows daily, while that of fabric remains steady. [...] So in the future, where can we find sufficient material to provide us with paper, and one that will not make paper too rare or too expensive. Wasps seem to be teaching us a possible method. Research in natural history, even that which only seems to be pure and simple curiosity, can be truly useful, which should be sufficient to justify it even to those who would only have us study useful things, if before blaming us they had the patience to wait for time to teach us what use we may make of it.'83,84

Although curiosity and a thirst for knowledge are powerful forces that can lead to a collection being started, an attraction to beauty is also a powerful force. Robien seemed to be sensitive to the beauty of the various insects he described. One example is the giant peacock moth – *Saturnia pyri* (DENIS & SCHIFFERMÜLLER, 1775), which he introduced as follows: 'The most beautiful and the largest of our butterflies in Europe.' Robien generally associated the caterpillar with the butterfly in his descriptions, and began his presentation of the great peacock moth with the caterpillar: 'It is born from a beautiful caterpillar that when small is initially brownish, then green with



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<sup>78</sup> Atropa belladonna L., 1753: Belladone, KOMMA, 1834.

**<sup>79</sup>** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 314.

**<sup>80</sup>** ROBIEN, 1749; RÉAUMUR, 1734.

<sup>81</sup> ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 301.

<sup>82</sup> DRÈGE 1987.

<sup>83</sup> ACADÉMIE, 1721, p. 252. It is worth nothing that almost three hundred years after the publication of Réaumur's text, it can still sometimes be difficult to defend what is today known as fundamental research. Applied research is often favoured as it can have short-term economic benefits. I can only hope that one day this question no longer needs to be asked: is not knowledge wealth in itself?

**<sup>84</sup>** GARRIN, 2012; AUBERT, 2001 a, p. 202.

**<sup>85</sup>** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 322.

blue tubers, just like an array of turquoises. His wonder at the beauty of butterflies probably played an important role in the creation of his butterfly raising enterprises, which enabled him to make many observations.

# The lesser bird-of-paradise: FIG. 32 and manuscript<sup>86</sup>

In his manuscript, Christophe-Paul de Robien began his chapter on birds with the description of a specimen that exactly matches the lesser bird-of-paradise (Paradisaea minor, SHAW, 1809)87: 'Those [feathers] on its head are very short, fine, and extremely dense in a beautiful golden colour rimmed near the beak with a velvety blue-black line, the lower throat is blue or dark-green, golden, and changes depending on the point of view, the upper back is a handsome lemon or daffodil yellow, while the upper part of the wings and outer feathers are a slightly darker fawn from whence issue two long feathers whose lower two thirds emerge as long strips that one would suppose to be their legs, with which they grasp the ends of branches in the highest trees for a moment of repose. The rest of their body is a combination of long feathers, very fine, wide and bearded with brownish-white.'88 At the time, the various birds-of-paradise species were grouped together under the generic term that he describes as follows: 'The apoda, that the Portuguese call paxaros di Sol or birds of the Sun, otherwise manu caudiata, birds of god, or birds of paradise.'89 It is interesting to note that many Papuan ethnicities today refer to them with terms meaning 'birds of the gods': manuk dewata in old Javanese, an appellation that is the origin for the generic term manu caudiata and in turn of the scientific genus name Manucodia (Boddaert, 1783). 90 As for the term bird-of-paradise, it dates from the very earliest specimens brought back to Europe on 6 September 1522, on the Victoria, one of Magellan's ships. After three years of sailing around the world, only fifteen of the original two hundred and seventy sailors landed in the port of Sanlúcar in Spain. Among the curiosities brought to the throne room of Emperor Charles Quint, lesser birds-of-paradise (preserved as skins and without feet) were named as such by the Dutchman Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1563–1611) around 1590 because of their coloured feathers and lack of feet. 91 This also explains the current scientific name of another species of bird-of-paradise, Paradisaea apoda, given by Linnaeus in 1758 – apoda meaning 'without feet'. One of the survivors of the Victoria, Italian sailor Antonio Pigafetta, explained that these birds did actually have feet, but that the local people always prepared them this way: no one believed him. It is indeed true that Papuans used (and still use in some remote areas) the skins and feathers of birds-of-paradise as adornments, and because of this, never preserved the feet. Three centuries were to pass before a European saw a living bird-of-paradise. This is why Robien wrote at the time, 'flying in the air so high that we only see them after their death, fallen amongst the trees'. It was only in 1824 that French naturalist René-Primevère Lesson (1794-1849), on his return from an expedition to New Guinea, published his scientific observations of living birds-of-paradise, thus introducing

Europeans to the reality. Oueru de La Coste indicates in his inventory that the bird-ofparadise in Robien's cabinet was 'well conserved in bamboo'. 4 Did Robien conserve it in this way in reference to Papuan legends that told of lesser birds-of-paradise sleeping in empty bamboo so as not to dirty their plumage?95 Continuing his descriptions, Robien presented specimens from another species 'which have feet in truth short but strong and with four toes'. Some bird-of-paradise trade-skins must therefore have been brought whole to Europe. Finally, it is interesting to note that Robien doubted some of these legends brought back from afar. On the subject of another bird-of-paradise species, he wrote: 'ordinarily they have a feathered back where a kind of cavity appears that is said to be used as a nest for the female to lay her eggs and brood while the male flies and supports her in the air, but these are fables that the Indians invent to make them more marvellous and heighten their esteem in the eyes of foreigners.' He also emphasised the lack of scientific knowledge about them: 'In truth we do not know what they are like alive nor how they live. This passage reveals his concern for direct observation, a scientific approach often discernible in his writing. 97

In addition, Robien wrote: 'These birds that were brought to us from the Moluccas.' However, the first species that he described, the lesser bird-of-paradise, like most other species of birds-of-paradise, actually only lives in New Guinea. European explorers did in fact collect the skins in the Maluka Islands, where they mostly arrived via an ancient two- to five-thousand-year-old trade route between New Guinea and a large area of Southeast Asia. 98 In the late nineteenth century, trade routes for bird-ofparadise skins opened up directly between New Guinea and Europe in order to satisfy the fashion for hat adornments. This trade, which continued for many years, reached its peak in the early twentieth century with up to eighty thousand skins exported each year. 99 It came to an end with World War II, and the birds' primary threat from human activity today is habitat destruction through logging, mining, etc. 100 At the present time, scientific expeditions to New Guinea are rare (especially deep inland), in particular because of difficulties related to the mountainous terrain and the island's climate. Little is thus known about many bird-of-paradise species, even today. To give just one example, morphometric studies and DNA analysis of preserved specimens from several museums have highlighted differences and revealed, for example, that one historically described species in fact corresponds to three distinct species. During expeditions to New Guinea in 2016 and 2017, variations in courtship behaviour, in both dance and song, were observed. 101

I had the opportunity to travel to New Guinea in 1998 and 1999, and so I will finish this section by recounting some of my own memories. I was able to observe courtship displays in the forest by six male lesser birds-of-paradise, and even though the birds were high in the trees and relatively far away, the sight will be forever etched in my mind. Secondly, I met Papuans who were still living in relative isolation from the

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93 OTTAVIANI, 2012, p. 11; LESSON, 1835.
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**<sup>86</sup>** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 364-365 and plate 139.

<sup>87</sup> DEL HOYO, 2009, pp. 404-492.

<sup>88</sup> ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 365.

<sup>89</sup> ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 364.

<sup>90</sup> OTTAVIANI. 2012. p. 54

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>92</sup> ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 364.

<sup>94</sup> OUÉRU DE LA COSTE. 1794.

<sup>95</sup> FRITH, 1998, p. 150.

**<sup>96</sup>** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 365.

**<sup>97</sup>** Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> FRITH, 1998, p. 29.

<sup>99</sup> FRITH, 1998, p. 34.

<sup>100</sup> When we know that humans have been living in New Guinea for approximately fifty thousand years, we can only lament the huge amount of damage that has been done over the past two centuries (see OTTAVIANI, 2012, p. 15).

<sup>101</sup> LAMAN, 2018.

FIG.33 Gray flying fox (Pteropus speciosus, Brisson, 1762), India; 20 x 21.5 x 9.5 cm; the Robien Collection (?), drawing in Robien's manuscript Description historique de son cabinet, ca. 1740, pl. 145 (Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, MS 0546); Muséum d'histoire naturelle de l'université de Rennes 1 (000218).

Western world, and I was impressed by the speed at which they were able to recognise. in a book, the illustration that matched a sub-species present in their environment: a specialised ornithologist could not have done better. This reminds us once again of the extent to which the ability to carefully observe is the basis of all scientific research.

# Bats: FIG. 33 and manuscript<sup>102</sup>

The last bird that Robien describes is not in fact a bird but 'large bats from the Indies'. 103 This is how he introduces the final paragraph: 'After describing oviparous birds [...], and before moving on to various quadrupeds, I think I should describe a species of bird that has something of both genuses.' He thus makes the transition between birds and quadrupeds by presenting bats. He insists on this fact by starting his presentation of the first quadruped - a flying squirrel - in the following way: 'The first is so closely related to the last bird species I described that I must join them as closely together as possible.'104 It is surprising to note that Robien seems restricted to a classification that prevents him from placing bats with quadrupeds, even though in the late seventeenth century, John Ray had classed them in the genus Vespertilio (a term that comes from the Latin vesper, meaning 'evening'). 105 Most zoologists after him retained this position among the quadrupeds, while nevertheless hesitating about their exact place in the group. And indeed, from the first edition of the Systema Naturae in 1735, Linnaeus placed bats with quadrupeds. 106 I should point out that Robien noted in 1749 107 that he did not have a copy of Systema Naturae in his library, although he did own at the time another work by Linnaeus - Genera Plantarum - published in 1743. For bats, Robien followed the old classification established by Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605), while noting the important differences between bats and birds: 'These animals, which have nothing of birds except their wings and the ability to traverse the air like them, are viviparous and even suckle their young with their own milk like most quadrupeds.' Robien had a copy of Natural History<sup>108</sup> by Pliny the Elder (23-79), who had already described them as viviparous birds that suckle their young. 109 The structure of bat wings is quite different to those of birds. With bats, the digits of its anterior limbs are highly elongated (except the first), and the patagium, attached to the body and the posterior limbs, stretches between them. This anatomical particularity is at the origin of their order name, 'Chiroptera', which comes from the Greek chir meaning 'hand' and pter meaning 'wing'.

Continuing his description, Robien writes: 'Extremely large ones can be found, and I have ones that from the one wing-tip to another are more than three feet.'110 At 97.5 cm, this can only be a species of megabat (the Pteropodidae family). This family today includes almost two hundred identified species. 111 Note that at the end of the eighteenth century, only thirty species of bat were indexed. This number has gradually risen to reach approximately 1,200 species today, which represents 21% of all mammal species

**102** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 392-393 and plate 145.

**103** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 392.

104 ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 394. **105** BLAINVILLE, 1841.

106 Ibid.

107 ROBIEN 1749. 108 Ibid., f. XIX.

**109** ARTHUR, 2015, p. 16; PLINE, 1722, p. 169.

110 ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, f. 393.

**111** MCDONALD, 2006, pp. 442-475.



in the world. This number continues to increase. 112 The conservation status of bats is of concern, however: in France, for example, eight of the seventeen mammal species listed as endangered by the IUCN Red List are bat species. 113 The three principal threats due to human activity are the disappearance or modification of habitats (destruction, but also light pollution, wind turbines, etc.), disturbance during hibernation, and the production and use of pesticides. On this latter point, it is important to note that the near totality of bats in Europe are insectivores, and as such as are highly susceptible to a decrease in insect populations. At a global level, 70% of bat species feed on insects or other arthropods such as spiders. The majority of the remaining 30% primarily consume fruit, nectar, and pollen. Only a few species eat vertebrates, and only three species living on the American continent feed on animal blood. 114

The general public knows little about the dietary habits of bats. Several reasons may explain this. The majority of bat species are nocturnal. They orient themselves, hunt, and communicate primarily by emitting ultrasonic sounds that are inaudible to the human ear. These sounds are most often produced with the larynx, although some species, such as horseshoe bats, can emit them through the nose. The sonic wave emitted moves through the air, and when it hits a target (an obstacle or prey), it bounces back in the form of an echo. The echo, picked up by their sensitive ears, is analysed and compared to the emitted sound, thus conveying information about the target (its distance, speed of travel, etc.). It was only after the development of radar systems during World War II that scientists began to understand bat echolocation. 115 Advances in technology have enabled better analysis of these sounds and thus a better understanding of bat behaviour. This research is vital for ethnology, because in order to understand an animal's behaviour, scientists must understand how it perceives its environment. It is only with this information that we can have an idea of what Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944) called the Umwelt, the 'self-centred world' of an organism. 116 The individuals of any one species perceive their own specific sensory information, and it is impossible for us to understand their behaviour without understanding the stimuli to which they respond. This notion of the 'self-centred world' was later taken up and employed in different disciplines (ethnology, sociology, history, etc.).

### Conclusion

Robien's vision of the world differed from our own, and this is easily explained if we take into consideration his cultural and technological environment, and the state of scientific knowledge at the time. We can see him as an observer with a taste for science, as he describes it himself: 'Driven early on by an intense interest in the study of natural history, I carried out observations, I did many experiments, and I gathered together material.'117 Indeed, he was elected to the Berlin Academy of Sciences in 1755 as an external member. 118 We also know that in 1749 he had a well-stocked library (between 2,378 and 2,943 volumes 119), which he referred to when documenting his

112 LOUREIRO, 2018; MORAS, 2018.

**113** UICN, 2017.

**114** MCDONALD, 2006, pp. 442-475.

115 BARATAUD 2015

**116** UEXKÜLL, 1965.

117 ROBIEN, 1751, p. ii.

118 AUBERT, 2001 a, p. 325.

119 Ibid., p. 309.

collections. He organised his collections according to the most relevant classifications of the day, especially in regard to insects and shells, even if we may observe certain shortcomings in other groups. Robien did not only examine many zoological groups, but he also studied plants, fossils, geology, arts, and so on. In today's modern world, the increase in scientific knowledge and the resulting technological advances have encouraged the specialisation of research - a progression that has required the creation of teams of interdisciplinary work in order to answer certain questions. Not only did Robien observe, class, and deduce, but he also thought critically about legends of the time and knew when to admit to a lack of knowledge - a fine quality in a scientist. His studies on 'human monsters' revealed his desire to understand, despite the societal reticence of the period. He wrote: 'If monsters are common among animals, they are no less so among human creatures. It is true that ancient prejudices and the shame that people believe is attached to bringing into the world productions of this kind impedes the spread of many people's knowledge. 120 I have not described this part of his collections, but the cases he presented are reported in detail, and his library included a relatively large amount of books on medicine and human anatomy, demonstrating his interest in studying them. 121 The criticisms we may wish to address in his regard could also be addressed to a number of enthusiasts, as well as to some of Robien's intellectual contemporaries, revealing to my mind the firm grip of religion at the time, rather than the state of knowledge. In France, from the time of Robien, certain political events, starting with the Revolution of 1789, led to a secularisation of the state and of science. 122 Buffon (1707–1788), to mention just one example, had to publicly disown part of his scientific discoveries made in 1751, as they ran counter to Christian texts. <sup>123</sup> In 1760, Buffon, who was preparing a speech, wrote a letter to the president of the Academy of Sciences: 'I feel as if I will be obliged to delete the few good things there are to say; but anyway, as someone once said, it's better to be humble than hung. 124 The secularisation of science would lead to great advances, especially in teaching, allowing a shared base of knowledge to be transmitted, essential to the smooth functioning of a Republican democracy. 125 Rather than criticising Robien, I feel it is more constructive to appreciate what he has brought us. First of all, reading his texts arouses a sense of wonder at the living world and at his questioning of it. And let's not forget that we are lucky to still be able to see some of his carefully preserved specimens, as part of his collection has made its way down to us after three centuries of eventful history. The conservation of natural history collections allows us to reconsider them in the light of current knowledge and techniques (DNA analysis, for example): this is one of the key functions of museums. 126 Moreover, these specimens can be used as a means for conveying scientific and historical information. Finally, we should bear in mind that the revolutionary confiscations of Robien's cabinet of curiosities, which was probably unique in Brittany at the time, 127 was the source of the collections of the Muséum d'Histoire naturelle et des arts, which opened in Rennes in

**120** ROBIEN, 1740, f. 419.

**121** ROBIEN, 1749.

**122** BRUCY, 2018.

123 ZARKA, 2014, p. 28.

**124** BOURDIER, 1951, p. 230.

**125** LECOINTRE, 2018

126 TAOUFT 2017.

**127** AUBERT, 2001 a, p. 198.

132 VERNIER, 2016.

1798. Although a large proportion of his natural history collections have undoubtedly disappeared over time, his specimens, exhibited in different locations in Rennes, contributed to the knowledge of intellectuals, the public, and students. During his lifetime, Robien introduced visitors from different backgrounds to his cabinet, many of whom recognised its value. 128 In fact, in two of his wills (in 1747 and 1752) he had demonstrated his willingness to bequeath his cabinet to the Bibiothèque des avocats, which he described as a 'public library'. 129 No matter the underlying reasons, these two decisions illustrate his desire for openness. Since then, the development of public service in France has given rise to a free and compulsory secular public-school system (1881–1882), and to the CNRS (1939), to name just these two institutions.

Now, please grant me the space for a digression; at the moment, we can see the effect that public service reform in France is having on scientific research. University researchers are increasingly forced to seek funds from various private enterprises. Because of this, we must remain vigilant in order to guarantee that there are no conflicts of interest, which would invalidate the results of any study carried out in this context.  $^{130}$  Some researchers (at universities and the CNRS) are also encouraged to create start-ups, thus transferring public research towards industry and private research, whose objectives are not regulated by the notion of public good.

And finally, I cannot speak about zoological collections without mentioning the impact of human activity on biodiversity. In Robien's day, protection of the environment was not a social issue, even if some human activities were already having a negative impact on biodiversity. I believe it is important to underline the fact that today's threats to the environment are highly dependent on political decisions – legislation on the protection of species, or of national parks, etc., but also the management of natural resources. To give just one example, in France, each year ten million tonnes of food (for human consumption only) is thrown away, including 67% during the production, processing, and distribution phases (this jumps to 80.8% if we include the restaurant industry), that is to say, completely outside of the consumer's direct control. At a global level, this number increases to 1.3 billion tonnes per year, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that 28% of agricultural land is used to produce food that will either be lost or wasted. 131 However, agriculture is currently, according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCB), one of the main threats to plant and animal species. We therefore urgently need to reconsider modes of production, processing, and distribution in terms of the protection of the environment. As these parameters are organised and managed at the political and economic level, the following question must be asked: are our current political and economic systems, many of which function on the basis of liberal capitalism, sufficient to protect the environment by way of a few environmental concessions, without calling into question their overall operation? I will leave it to each individual to answer this question, one that pertains to our civic responsibility. 132

**128** Ibid., p. 249.

**129** Ibid., p. 250.

**130** MAXIM, 2012.

131 FAO 2013

MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD - THE ZOOLOGY COLLECTIONS - Gaëlle Richard 117

# IN PRAISE OF THE CURIOUS

A man must have been born in a cultured society in order to find within himself the patience necessary to live out the whole of his life in the midst of it, and never once desire to escape somewhere, away from the sphere of all those oppressive conventions, legalized by custom, of petty, malicious lies, from the sphere of sickly self-conceit, of sectarianism of ideas, of all sorts of insincerity – in a word, from all that vanity of vanities which chills the emotions, and perverts the mind.

(Maksim Gorky, Konovalov, in Selected Short Stories, 1892–1901, Foreign Languages Pub. House., 195-, trans. Margaret Wettlin)

Nearly all Western thought since the last war [1914–1918], certainly all 'progressive' thought, has assumed tacitly that human beings desire nothing beyond ease, security, and avoidance of pain.

(George Orwell, 'Review of Mein Kampf' The New English Weekly, 21.03.1940)

Although the presentation in 2012 of the Robien collections in the form of the cabinet of curiosities as it was around 1740 is particularly impressive, insofar as major institutions inheriting this type of collection, such as Oxford (Ashmolean Museum) or Vienna (Kunsthistorisches Museum), had paradoxically instead preferred a museum-style arrangement, the choice was certainly not random, as every work is a product of its time.

As if in response to the major shifts in paradigms brought about by the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution, which a clearly assumed rational liberalism established as of James Cook's second voyage (1772), does our age not reveal a sensitivity upset by the profound challenging of our environmental and interpersonal frameworks, through the undeniable trend of the cabinet of curiosities, which has now been



proliferating for almost three decades in temporary exhibitions, museums, and artistic research? It can be disturbing to realise to what extent these new and shared concerns are translated into spatial arrangements swamped with uncertain and unranked items – an approach representing a radical break with the classical organisational code of the exhibition and the traditional classification of museums, analysing, isolating, and providing information about objects.

The Robien collection, which could also be visited during its owner's lifetime, had the honour of being listed among the eleven most important provincial cabinets in the kingdom of France.¹ The main body of the collection was organised into three main pillars: natural history collections (nearly eight thousand specimens, according

**FIG.34** The entrance to Robien's cabinet of curiosities at the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes at its reopening to the public on 22 May 2012.

<sup>1</sup> DEZALLIER, 1742, pp. 198-230, in particular p. 212.

to Quéru de la Coste during the revolutionary confiscation²), a numismatic collection (three thousand coins and medals), and finally, the library, with its four thousand, three hundred books,³ the largest collection belonging to an individual in Brittany and a true recognition of the savant collector.

However, the items within this rich heritage have variously resisted the indignities of history. The natural history section has not survived; only a very few items are today preserved at the University of Rennes I. Apparently neglected by Robien's son, it suffered from the city of Rennes's lack of savoir-faire; no one had the expertise to ensure its conservation during the confiscation of 1794. The good intentions of Quéru de la Coste, who was the official administrator, were mostly directed towards a desire to complete the collection and therefore make it accessible to visitors, rather than restorative measures, which due to the lack of a specific budget, were too expensive. Finally, the revolutionary turmoil – this was in the middle of the Chouannerie uprisings – meant that the collection had to be moved at least four times between 1794 and 1815, in quite precarious conditions; it would seem that porters stuffed objects into baskets and jute bags, which was hardly the best way to protect those objects that were still in good condition.

The numismatic collection did not emerge unscathed from these successive moves either, but for other reasons. It was only when Auguste André (1804–1878), the tenured curator of the museum during the nineteenth century, gave his coin collection to the institution for which he was responsible that the collections historian discovered in amazement the misadventures of Robien's collection: pieces had been stolen, had circulated on the Rennes market, or had been hoarded by families in good faith for two generations before gradually becoming part of the curator's collection. André seemed to have no idea about their provenance. Once some of the pieces were examined and compared against drawings in Robien's manuscript, there was no doubt as to where they had come from.<sup>5</sup>

And finally, the books: their value as a means of 'public instruction' meant that they were immediately integrated into the local library. Some of them already existed in the Rennes marketplace and the doubles later enriched collections in other Breton cities (the library at Saint-Brieuc, for example). However, most of them are still conserved today at the Bibliothèque des Champs Libres in Rennes.

In Robien's time, the cabinet owed its good repute to the aspect that is so lacking today – natural history. Neither the paintings nor the graphic artworks foliated in various codex (no doubt part of his library and that are now treasured by the museum) were remarked on by Robien's contemporaries; even the beautiful sets of Chinese porcelain, which were likely all part of drawing room decorations and most probably inherited from the collector's father, Paul de Robien (1660–1744), are not clearly described. Between these two extremes, the section on exotic objects, which is today presented in the museum's exhibition rooms and is the theme of this volume, forms the modest.

visible part of what was once the collection's pride and joy: barely eleven pages of descriptions in a two-volume manuscript that devotes nearly seven hundred and fifty to coins and *naturalia*.<sup>6</sup>

The question raised in 1972 of reconstituting the cabinet, on the occasion of its first presentation in Rennes, acquires its full meaning in our current context of the globalisation of exchanges in general, and more particularly of the evolution of the museum institution, which so faithfully expresses this movement. This major change, which affects both the traditional scale and speed of exchanges, requires an appropriate culture that is still far from complete, suitable mental tools allowing the challenges to be correctly envisaged, a mature and relevant emotional intelligence appropriate for sharing supportive intuitions, and a taste for working together for a more compatible shared destiny. In this regard, the reinstallation of the cabinet in May 2012 played a similar role to that originally performed in the eighteenth century, as a major watershed in Western civilisation that entrenched naturalism, endowing it with a new hierarchical taxonomy, universal ideals, and a utilitarian materialism, held up by a social class in search of legitimacy and power: the bourgeoisie. Today, how can we give meaning to something that is in a process of metamorphosis? How can we preserve a memory that fosters connections between people? How can we become involved with new forms of creative freedoms? These are some of the contemporary challenges that the presentation of the cabinet draws our attention to, and that the museum can (must?) appropriate if it also wishes to be a relevant institution.

The awareness of these changes has been variously represented in the world of museums, and paradoxically, it is across the Atlantic, in a country where almost no cabinets of this sort existed (except for the collections of the East India Marine Society, EIMS, of Salem, 1799, or that of Charles Willson Peale in Philadelphia, 1801), that this medium has been doing the rounds since the 1990s. Artists have also been reappropriating the cabinet process (Mark Dion at the John Hopkins University in Baltimore, early 1990s) because of its profoundly polysemous nature. It gives the impression of heterogeneous accumulation, a painting-like arrangement or even a mnemonic figure, the beauty of the bizarre, of the rare and curious, never-before-seen combinations of pertinence and knowledge; in short, a sort of metaphor for a chaos incubator through which the imagination can dare to do anything.

Subsequently, these characteristics have modified the position of visitors, allowing them to escape from their role as Philistines coming to further their education, and legitimise an approach that is instead based on an autonomy that solicits one's individuality. The institution no longer represents a hierarchical authority, flowing from the scholarly to the secular, because not only does it not fully understand many of the items it exhibits, due to their rarity or their unusual hybridization, but it also neglects that which oversaw their assembly. In the museum's modesty in recreating a cabinet in which many of the elements for understanding escape it, visitors can rediscover an inner freedom, with their imagination allowing them to venture onto the path of the non-thought, the purely experiential.

And so, when visitors enter the Columbus Museum of Art (Ohio, United States), a long, transparent display case welcomes them, dotted with all sorts of objects from all kinds of backgrounds (Arlene and Michael Weiss Cabinet, FIG.35). This marriage of the cabinet of

<sup>2</sup> In his book, Gauthier Aubert made an estimation based on the following archives: AD 35 L. 966 and AN, collection F 17, 1270a (see AUBERT, 2001 a, p. 197, col. 2). The counting of the AMR, R10/10 4, on 3 Thermidor, Year 13 (22 July 1805), signed Paste and Quéru, recorded 9,405 items of natural history.

**<sup>3</sup>** PERSON, 1972, pp. 172–185; AUBERT, 2001 a, pp. 309–332, in particular p. 309.

<sup>4 &#</sup>x27;I was conveyed on First Germinal [21 March 1974] to the house of the émigré Robien; I found a natural history cabinet [...] I noticed there was a rich assortment but in absolute disorder and abandoned for more than 40 years [...]' Pierre Quéru de la Coste, AD 35 L. 966 of 6 Floréal, Year II [21 April 1974], first page. 'This cabinet was in such a state of neglect and abandonment that dust made it entirely impossible to recognise several articles.' Pierre Quéru de la Coste, AN F17 1223-1224, file 4, item 154.

**<sup>5</sup>** Oral account by Nicolas Dubreu, numismatist, 26 September 2016.

**<sup>6</sup>** Mss 546 and 547, Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, Rennes - Métropole.

curiosities and an intellectual's writing desk orients them, not towards the exhibition halls with paintings and objects, but towards a thinking zone called the Creativity Lounge, which precedes a Wonder Room, where their creativity is brought into play (FIGS.36 and 37). Entering this first room, visitors can only be struck by the sheer size of the educational spaces, where signs and decorative posters that provide direction heighten curiosity as much as they reveal its consecration. Disturbed by these places without objects, the visitors are unambiguously encouraged to employ their critical thinking, to take the time to look, to appropriate the works and their meanings. Through this array of utterances, they are able to grasp the intensity and radicalness of the emancipatory teaching techniques that maintain them in a balance between stupefaction and stimulation, prior to their visit to the collections.







The Columbus Museum is far from an exception: many American institutions in Williamstown, North Adams, Hartford, Boston, Houston, and Baltimore, and no doubt many others, are working to upset the paradigm that stipulates conforming to institutional culture (also thanks to dynamic public services that enjoy the trust of their parent company), instead giving visitors the personal motivation and legitimacy to engage with heritage. The wonder rooms at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford and the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore are without a doubt the most striking examples of cabinets today. Reconstituting eclecticism, strangeness, finesse, and the original rarity of Renaissance cabinets, set out according to an aesthetic approach of frontality and symmetry, displayed in pieces of furniture that are pure models of beauty, their didactic vocation unfolds over several levels.

The key to this change results from a focus on the human ability to feel, experience, and be moved by works, emotions whose synthesis is crystallised by the image of the cabinet, and not only by the capacity of the human brain to record new information, which might then engender emotions. This upsetting of traditional teaching practice in favour of emotion, that the recent dissemination of the concept of emotional intelligence has legitimised and popularised, seems only a detail, but the consequences are considerable. The experiential dimension of a visit to the museum is now established as an alternative in learning environments that finally recognises the diversity of heritage approaches. Certainly, some might say that these American cabinets are all fictional, as they have never existed in the historical evolution of American collections (apart from the listed exceptions), but this is categorically not the case for Robien's perfectly authentic collection. That said, what has been grasped and implemented is its ability to act as a tool for encouraging a salutary ensemble of alternatives to accepted museum practices: a new relationship between the visitor and the museum, a new type of collection that reaffirms the diversity and polysemy of existing collections, a questioning of frameworks for thought emerging from the Enlightenment, in particular its hierarchical taxonomy, which is often hardly relevant here. In a nutshell, a perfect match between an unusual form of museum presentation and a new substratum of knowledge.

FIG.35 The Arlene and Michael Weiss cabinet. Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio

FIGS.36 and 37 The Creativity Lounge, Columbus Museum of Art Ohio

FIG.38 Genre art, Couple in a Landscape (detail), Canton, China, ca. 1760–1770; painting on glass, 36.5 x 103.4 x 4 cm; Paul-Christophe-Céleste de Robien (1731–1799) collection; Musée des beauxarts de Rennes (794.1.624).

**FIG.39** Portrait of a Lady (fragments), Canton, China, 1760; reverse glass painting, 18.4 x 19.8 cm; former collection of Jules Aussant (1805–1872), possibly originating from the Robien Collection; Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (1870.66.1).

This recent entreaty to emotions emerges from a gradual increase in interest over the last few decades in the figure of the collector and his or her tastes and pretensions – in short, from an emphasis on all the subjective characteristics in the literal sense that precede the entry of items into public collections. This infatuation is not only connected to the necessity for renewing propositions for museum events (whether for temporary exhibitions or cultural mediation activities), but it is also the sign of major cultural changes requiring an emotional investment in order to confront them: this detour by way of subjectivity enables the cards of the hierarchy of knowledge to be reshuffled by modifying the points of view that we direct towards them, and subsequently enables us to be creative in our search for solutions for adaptation. Regarding this, the phenomenon of Robien's cabinet shows its worth as a specimen and, throughout the process of its creation, in a psychological examination, delivers interesting observations that prove the symptomatic dimension of the upheavals that were occurring during the Enlightenment.

The contemporary researcher's constant immersion in naturalist thought, which is today our Western approach,7 makes him or her less inclined to investigate a major cultural phenomenon such as that of the cabinet, with its anthropological processes of elaboration and its concrete results: at this point, I must say that because of the taxonomist efforts of Krzysztof Pomian (that is, that the form of curiosity established in the eighteenth century found its fulfilment for the monied elite in cabinets of antiquities and for the intellectual elite with naturalia<sup>8</sup>), collections such as Robien's embarrass the historian<sup>9</sup> who doesn't know where or how to appropriately classify them. I must underline in this respect that none of our parliamentarian's contemporaries used the term, strictly speaking, 'cabinet of curiosities' to describe his collection, despite the wide range of forms contained within it. Indeed, as a reminder and to sum up, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the cabinet of curiosities was in turn, and sometimes in parallel, the manifestation of a conquering pride and glory, a scientific investigation, a form of curious research, and the expression of a memetic society life. 11 It traversed a whole series of stages that revealed the variety of delays to human understanding of the world, as well as the pride of sociability or its appropriation by different social classes, each with its own sensitivities and culture, sovereigns, aristocratic elite, educated or scientific bourgeoisie, etc., all historical characteristics that from the outset make the phenomenon difficult to contain within precise limits.

Robien's multifaceted approach demonstrates this, too. In the chapter devoted to the 'Ouvrages de l'Art', Robien's cabinet is quite analogical and generalises the practice of associating ideas that are organised under the umbrella of an overarching aesthetic. In contrast, in his sections relating to natural history, he presents himself rather more as being in search of a naturalism as yet without a name,



<sup>7</sup> DESCOLA, 2006, in particular chap. III, 8, pp. 241-279.

<sup>8</sup> POMIAN, 1987, p. 155.

<sup>9</sup> AUBERT, 1998, in particular p. 55: 'Robien appears from this point on as a member of these two circles [of collectors] [...] But that Robien was also an antiquarian demonstrates the paradox of the situation'; p. 56: 'From this point on, the President will be a sort of exceptional collector.'

<sup>10</sup> GERSAINT, 1736, p. 38; DEZALLIER, 1742, p. 212: 'the beautiful collection that he has gathered together' referring only to natural history in L'histoire naturelle éclaircie dans deux de ses deux parties principales, la lithologie et la conchyliologie, dont l'une traite des pierres l'autre des coquillages..'; and Piganiol de la Force recommends that when in Rennes one must visit 'the cabinet of antiquities and natural history of President de Robien', in PIGANIOL, 1754, p. 276.

**<sup>1</sup>** GARGAM, 2009.

engaging with a thought process based on a codifying and classifying logic from physical characteristics. Finally, he is clearly subsumed, no doubt at the time of the handwritten description of the collections, by very general ideas that take on an apodictic value concerning the phenomenon of widespread beliefs within human lore. From his statue of Vishnu to Indian divinities represented in his book about Patna and the supposedly Mexican idol (see François Coulon, 'Idol', pp. 222-223), Robien sees them as historical proof of what he aims to demonstrate, without actually stripping them of their interiorities. Consequently, from its anthropological aspect, Robien's cabinet appears as a tool enabling sometimes paradoxical experiments that actualise the use of imaginative methods encouraging emotion. And so to conclude with this quest for meaning, although with his 'Ouvrages de l'Art, Robien seems to want to prove to himself that humanity has been traversed from time immemorial and in all places by the most diverse beliefs (which he viewed disapprovingly), as for the fine organisation of his series of coins and naturalia, with their linear presentation, they appear as the underlying demonstration that knowledge permits progress, and that this undoubtedly leads to the truth. 12

A major watershed in Western Europe, the eighteenth century caused a sort of malaise that Montesquieu described so well, <sup>13</sup> and of which the organisational temporisations of Robien's cabinet are perhaps symptomatic. Is it a mere coincidence that Robien was so sensitive to these changes in thinking? As the heir to a venerable culture of nobility, from a long line of parliamentarians, he indubitably received the glory of the *mortier* as a legacy, that distinctive hat that set magistrates off and demanded that one 'reside immobile in one's vanity like a planet in its sphere'. How could such a curious soul reconcile the culture of an immutable tradition with the shifts in paradigms of his time? Curiosity gave him a search for meaning in the form of a virtuous circle, which is even more disturbing when we recall that he had no first name before reaching adulthood (he signed his name 'Anonime de Robien' 14). Enabling him to decompartmentalise codes in order to have a dissident relationship with all sorts of authorities and derive pleasure from his research, curiosity was without doubt the tool that, in the stage prior to discovery, allowed him to dare to reexamine everything.

The troubling question of legacy in the Robien family arises in a concrete manner. Like in other library and bibliophile dynasties, such as the Grollier de Servière or the de Bure families, Robien received from his father, Paul de Robien (1660–1744) a very large library, which he safeguarded, expanded, and passed on to his own son Paul-Christophe-Céleste (1731–1799), who in turn increased and safeguarded it – the publication dates attest to this. The hypothesis that the set of blue porcelain from China was also handed down from the father, Paul de Robien, is accepted, too. And finally, as for the objects, his son Paul-Christophe-Céleste indisputably enriched the collection: the extant paintings on glass (FIG.38), made in Canton in China, where a nephew known as 'le Chinois', Pierre-Louis-Achille de Robien (1736–1792), had lived from 1766 to 1777, could only have come to Rennes after the death of Christophe-Paul. The same goes for the Book of Porcelain and the Book of Tea, whose style indicates that they were made in

the 1770s, and so would have joined the collection long after Christophe-Paul's death. Curiously, for the Robien family, it is not a question (or if so, only a marginal one) of distributing the objects after the collector's death, as was almost always the case when cabinets of curiosities were involved. Is it necessary to recall that for three centuries, since the Renaissance, all of Europe had been overflowing with cabinets (one per village in the Netherlands at the time of the Dutch East Indies Company, Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC) but that apart from Robien's collection and a few belonging to prince-electors or sovereigns (Wittelsbach in Landshut; Habsburg in Innsbruck and Vienna; Peter the Great in St Petersburg), and former universities in Germany (Ernestinum in Gotha, Franckesche Stiftungen in Halle), not one is left today?15 Without this exceptional transmission from one to the next of the three Robiens, there would not have been a collection to confiscate during the Revolution. This passing on of a family heritage, which is a feature of the Robien family (more common among bibliophiles), betrays other characteristics. It assumes a near-institutional quality that could be compared to the scholar's demonstrated attempts to create, in vain during his lifetime, a Breton academy of sciences and arts (he tried in 1727 and 1738), and of which an avatar, the Agricultural Society, was approved only a year after his death in 1757 (see Martine Fabre, 'Robien or Regarding the Utility of Things', pp. 56-69).

Furthermore, the originality in the way the collection was passed on echoes its own originality. The nature of the objects that it comprises is also broader that the categories into which they can be grouped. If we look at the Western objects first of all, we are struck by what we are obliged to call an amassing or even the rescue of leftovers from other cabinets, vestiges of former splendour, modest but illustrious tokens of a bygone magnificence. Enamel medieval medallions, little wax statuettes, ruin marble, Florentine intarsia works in pietra dura, plates of Milanese cast iron inlayed with gold, or even delicate ivory statues; all these no longer fashionable decorative remains from various cabinets inhabit his shelves. Just like another bibliophile, Nicolas Lenglet du Fresnoy (1674-1755), who in 1750 made written compilations of the masterly books from the royal library that had been deemed obsolete, 16 Robien had a concern for historical record, for the poetry of traces, for time passing. And during that century, he was not the only one for whom a certain awareness of the volatility of time arose. If we look at the exotic objects, the number of hapax gives food for thought: a club from Borneo (see Anthony Meyer, "The "Robien Club" of the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes: a "Herculian" Hypothesis', pp. 350-353), a Tang Chinese thumb ring, a Chimú statuette from Peru, a double-chambered Indian pipe, etc. These are all objects that are hard to interpret, given the lack of a body of work concerning them. But some objects are even more difficult to classify, including the Mi'kmaq screen, with its European shape and iconographic vocabulary but Indian composition and technique, 17 or the vessels known as Tonalá (see Andrés Gutiérrez Usillos, 'Beyond Tonalá', pp. 214-221), whose origins err between Spain, and North and South America. The gathering up of all these, quite frankly strange objects does not result from a mimetic approach that pursues in an archaic fashion the paths of former cabinets of curiosities, despite striking similarities with old cabinets of the

<sup>12 &#</sup>x27;It is more forgivable to sin against truth than to bring insult to beauty', in STERNE, 1759, p. 141.

<sup>13</sup> MONTESQUIEU, 1748, Book IV, chapter IV, p. 65: 'Today we receive three educations, which differ or even conflict: that of our parents, that of our teachers, and that of the world. What the last tells us reverses all the ideas received during the first.'

<sup>14</sup> Robien was only baptised on 3 October 1714, at the age of sixteen, with the name Christophe-Paul. AD 22, BMS register of the Quintin old quarter; see AUBERT, 2001, p. 23, notes 90 and 91.

<sup>15</sup> The only other exception is the Tradescant family in Oxford, John I (1570–1638) and John II (1608–1662?). See MCGREGOR, 1983.

**<sup>16</sup>** GOULEMOT, 2011.

**<sup>17</sup>** BIGER, 2016.

German prince-electors of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Robien's cabinet corresponds to quite another quest. <sup>18</sup>

In view of the fundamentally polysemous nature of the cabinet, aside from the desire for meaning, transmission, and that of saving a heritage collection in a situation of escheat, it is likely that Robien also took care to revisit tried and tested operating practices: that of an art of the memory, and therefore, of its obvious teaching properties, which perhaps would have been used to share his ideas across Brittany, had he been able to create his academy. The title of his manuscript should draw our attention: it is a Description. But what is a description, if it is not the fabrication of an image used to serve the rhetoric of a discourse that will only be more relevant and memor(is)able? In the end, the manuscript texts are simply glorified lists, without much detail except in rare cases; in all honesty they make for a sluggish reading experience. For those who persevere, the gradual discovery of the manuscript inevitably leaves an impression of disappointment; the style of the text, the body of which is often dotted with references left blank (we are confronted with a lack of information), is heavy and repetitive, with a limited vocabulary that inclines one to indigestion. For those familiar with other more prestigious cabinets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe. for example, those of Beger, Kircher, Baillou, 19 etc., this flimsiness is frustrating. But this is where one must once again see Robien's approach as being part of a process of personal memorisation in order to understand it.

The compilations (also present in the form of chants in oral cultures) emerge here from the mnemonic culture of the book-based or Herennian tradition:<sup>20</sup> it is a question, within a sequence of successive words where the global meaning is explicit (Robien indicates this with his chapter titles), of creating elements of written context enabling him to recall the information that is noted within. As with a visual *ars memoriae*, inherited from the traditions of Simonides and Cicero, the page acts as a *locus*, and the sequential link between described objects, as striking as it may be, plays the role of *imagines agentes*. From this perspective, Robien's manuscript, but also his cabinet of curiosities, become nothing more than the reformulation of a certain technique in the art of memory. Here I wish to quickly recall how this millennia-old technique functions (to be honest, it is highly likely that the teaching methods and various techniques of the *ars memorativa* were invented collectively, in the most pragmatic way possible, by teachers wanting their students to remember their lessons).

One of the memory techniques used in Ancient Greece and Rome (here I am simply summarising what has already been described numerous times, by Rossi and Yates, but also by all those who followed in their footsteps<sup>21</sup>), a period in which students were not able to take notes with a pencil and paper (at best, they used a stylus and two tablets covered in wax that had to be continually wiped off), basically consisted of visualising a place, or *locus*. It is a question of imagining, but without too much effort, a matrix; for example, a real monument that was seen every day. Without having to count them, a young Roman student at the time of Cicero would have

known the number of columns, bases, abacuses, etc. on each temple of the Capitoline Triad, where he went nearly every day. This prerequisite results from the discovery that human memory is indeed connected to the place where it was evoked. It is then possible to mentally assign words, concepts, and ideas to the architectural elements of the matrix. It is nothing more, nothing less than the visualisation of architectural elements that provides a base, like a list of ideas related to a subject. However, in order to recapture these ideas in their correct sequence without losing track, which is not necessarily 'logical', striking images (these *imagines agentes*) still have to be associated with them, acting as the emblem 'stuck' to the architectural elements. Ultimately, it is the emotions that are connected to the images that allow us to retrieve our ideas, in the order indicated by the architectural matrix.

To create these striking images so that, even if only for the person using them, they at least minimally relate to the ideas that they represent as a symbol, the spontaneous mechanisms of analogy must be drawn upon. An entirely personal association of ideas allows the subject organising their thoughts to combine an idea with an image. It is then simply a case of remembering the sequence and number of architectural elements of the matrix on which the image/idea alliance was superposed to successfully remember one's speech. This memorisation technique was effective because it allowed a medical student in the Middle Ages to defend a thesis for ten or so hours without notes in front of a panel of doctors.<sup>22</sup>

The issue of the analogy is very important here, because even though the available images are cultural, their association is personal. This is precisely what the cabinet of curiosities reveals: despite the grouping of objects under titles belonging to a shared locus (mirabilia, artificialia, naturalia, etc.), the grouping of objects is a product of the owner's entirely personal association of ideas. Even if Robien is certain to have used a labelling system that named the artefacts and perhaps added some information, his discourse pertaining to the objects first had to use these as imagines agentes in order to be able to remember that which via metonomy (that is, synecdoche) the object might represent. Then the association of objects unfolds according to the overall logic of the discourse, just like a demonstration. The cabinet is, therefore, in its polysemy, also a list of objects ordered according to its creator's ordo and depending on a mnemotechnical process.

The necessarily quirky nature of the associations between ideas and objects should not be misjudged in Robien's cabinet, which groups together Renaissance, Mexican, Persian, and ancient objects. Even if the excellence of the virtues of naturalist taxonomy of the eighteenth century cannot be emphasised enough for its heuristic capacities, we must recognise in the poetry of analogy the great freedom of personal action, and even more, an influential imaginative fecundity that dares to make unexpected connections.<sup>23</sup> If we are to examine the role of Robien in this first half of the eighteenth century, it is less from the viewpoint of the ultimate avatar of the creator of the cabinet, than that of a personality who has brought together the ever so illuminating symptoms of the arrangement of a didactic memory system, allowing him to assimilate his accumulated knowledge and then, subsequently, to transmit it. A

<sup>18</sup> I hope to address this point in a future volume dealing with Western objects, in which the interest in medieval subject matter overtaking natural aristocratic inclinations will be developed.

 $<sup>\</sup>textbf{19} \ \ \text{Of which Robien owns the works in his library}.$ 

<sup>20</sup> ACHARD, 1989

<sup>21</sup> Today, there is a plethora of literature about the arts of memory that touches on all domains: literary, artistic, scientific, and even computer science. In 1966, however, Frances Amelia Yates stated in YATES, 1975, note 1, p. 13: 'On the whole, the subject has been curiously neglected.' Even today, it is rarely taught (see the bibliography).

<sup>22</sup> This reference is still missing a small one- or two-line note.

<sup>23</sup> Here I am simply modestly retracing the paths already clearly marked out by Lévi-Strauss, where he underlines to what extent so-called civilised Western thought is actually that of productivity, and that the so-called savage mind conveys as much an indication 'that the signs expressed carry with them their meaning', LEVI-STRAUSS, 1962, Chapter VIII, p. 223.

little in the style of Menocchio in *The Cheese and the Worms* in the sixteenth century, <sup>24</sup> Robien reacts to a major blow, mentioned above, that appears in the eighteenth century. This is no doubt related not only to the advances made by scientific minds, which led to a profound change in the view of humankind and the world, but also to the method employed, which, using an analytical approach, requires a final image to give overall meaning to the mosaic of data that ensues.

It is on precisely these aspects that Robien is our contemporary, because he reveals the permanence of the steps in the appropriation of knowledge, which seems so familiar to us from the observation of museum visitors today: curiosity, a search for understanding, pleasure in discovery, and memorisation are the same steps that *Homo sapiens* take in their search for meaning. In this regard, Robien's approach could be seen as that of Palinurus in the act of mediating cultural information to the museum visitor, just as the succession in the trio 'surprise, sharing, memorisation' acts as a spiral that re-enchants learning stages, and in exchange stimulates the curiosity of visitors, furthers their surprise, encourages communication, and develops memory. This didactic aspect of the cabinet, a sort of edification of the mind through examples by bringing together what the analytical mind separates, was already well known by Robien's contemporaries, particularly in Germany.

The pedagogical ideas of Goethe (1749–1832), brought to life in the Bibliotheca Bodmeriana in Geneva, as well as those of pastor Jean-Frédéric Oberlin (1740–1826) in Waldersbach, or even the demonstration of the exhibition at the Ernestinum Gymnasium in Gotha in 2013 at the Friedenstein castle, <sup>25</sup> with its collections of natural history based on Andreas Reyher's teaching (1601–1673), who published his *Schulmethodus* from 1642, <sup>26</sup> clearly demonstrates that the modalities of the cabinet are consciously used as a tool for instructing children, but also adults <sup>27</sup> (see Lisa Slade, 'Robien's Cabinet and Macquairie's Chest', pp. 166–173).

From the wonder that in the eighteenth century was closely linked to natural things, pedagogy contains an energy that is able to arouse and maintain students' curiosity. This dynamic is, of course, present within Robien's cabinet. Through its exceptional Wunderkammer aspects, which adjoin the strangeness of its exotica, it unites its whole audience, both regular museum-goers, who have never before seen such a thing, and first-time visitors. And so, the question of high or low culture, or of the existence of an elite, is no longer relevant: no one is placed in a lower position, because not only do the categories of objects presented no longer correspond to the rational and abstract system of the hierarchical and classifying museum, but what's more, the objects themselves are often hybrid and do not correspond to any fixed category. Instead of performing knowledge, visitors discover, at their own level and depending on their own interests, entire sections of culture that are presented from unexpected points of view or classification, thus validating a multifaceted approach for objects of knowledge. Indeed, the most important aspect is no doubt that of the effect produced by the visit on some audiences: the initial wonder sometimes evolves into another, this time heuristic wonder, as it allows visitors to enter the rare path of interpretation.



**<sup>24</sup>** GINZBURG, 1980.

**<sup>25</sup>** SALATOWSKY, 2013.

**<sup>26</sup>** REYHER, 1642.

**<sup>27</sup>** BOLZONI, 1994.

The American teaching strategies I presented, despite their calls for curiosity, imagination, creativity, and a critical thinking that pertains to faith in the spontaneous empowerment of the individual, relating to a personal approach in the appropriation of knowledge, also have a pragmatic side manifestly oriented towards a form of utility that seems to correspond with a certain vision of the 'North American man', according to which the individual is responsible for his own destiny, just like a man of business. Whether at the MASS MoCA in North Adams or the Columbus Museum of Art, the fact of frequenting the museum is presented as facilitating the subject's responsibility and autonomy, with the aim of leading to harmonious social change. Other institutions in Canada, perhaps advocating a more empathetic approach, have restored a therapeutic dimension to the act of visiting works of art<sup>28</sup> (reminding us of the time-honoured dedication that Marguerite Yourcenar attributes to Plotina, engraved on the entrance to the library in Trajan's Forum in Rome: 'Hospital for the Soul'29). For now, the ambition of the cabinet at the Musée de Rennes is oriented towards

bringing back the enchantment of learning through emotions. Because, beyond the quantitative and utilitarian ambition clearly marked by the needs of productivity and designed to bring as large an audience as possible to the museum with collections that harmoniously combine emotion and cognition, the beauty, strangeness, and mysteries of the cabinet are intended to restore, like a manifesto, 'loyalty to the depth of our psyche and faith in the destiny of humankind.'30

<sup>28</sup> See the 'L'art fait du bien' programme, 2016, at the Michel de la Chenelière International Atelier for Education and Art Therapy in Montreal, or the medical prescriptions issued for visiting museums in Quebec!

<sup>29</sup> YOURCENAR, 1951: 'I often think of the noble inscription placed by Plotina's order over the door of the library she established in Trajan's Forum: Hospital for the Soul.'

<sup>30</sup> Philippe Quéau, Metaxu, blog post 09.12.2015.

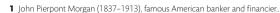
# CONVERSATIONS ON CABINETS

# BETWEEN FRANÇOIS COULON AND LINDA ROTH CURATOR OF DECORATIVE ARTS AT THE WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

### How did you come up with the idea of recreating a cabinet of curiosities?

Well, it didn't come from my studies. I did art history in school but never heard about cabinets of curiosities during my studies, which didn't cover decorative arts. When I went to Hartford, I got a job at the museum as a research assistant for paintings. This was in 1981 and at the time no one was curating the European decorative arts section. After a couple of years, I started becoming interested in the museum's decorative arts collection and started to focus more seriously on it. And then in 1985 we decided to do an exhibition on Pierpont Morgan, which was what introduced me to cabinets of curiosities.

As we started to work on the nautilus cups and the ivory tankards, we learned about the context in which these objects were made. I had Helmut Seling come to examine the silver gilt and identify the marks, as well as Christian Theuerkauff for the ivories, and that's when I started to learn more. But when we did the exhibition in 1986–87, I was still looking at the objects as discrete works of art. They were just a part of the exhibition, which also included porcelain from Meissen and Sèvres, and maiolica. So, I was still thinking about these things as individual pieces, even though I knew they had been created for a specific context.



<sup>2</sup> Helmut Seling (1921–2016), German art historian and art dealer, specialising in silver and gold work; Christian Theuerkauff, German art historian, expert in cabinets of curiosities.



# That's very interesting. As I understand it, you, like other colleagues specialising in cabinets, believe that you have to be a generalist, not a specialist, to work with cabinets, because they don't focus on one category of objects, but on all kinds of pieces.

Little by little, I became responsible for the entire European decorative arts section, from ancient pottery and glass through to the nineteenth century. And what I ended up really focusing on was Sèvres porcelain. This is the field in which I have done most of my research and publishing. I've always been in charge of installing and looking after the Morgan collection of European decorative arts at the museum, so over time, and because I did the gallery installations, I was continually dealing with nautilus cups and ivory tankards. When I first started working, in the mid-eighties, these pieces were installed in galleries, but not as a cabinet.

FIG.41 Entrance to the Hartford cabinet of curiosities, Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum, Connecticut; engraved nautilus shell (Germany, 17th century), wood-turned masterpieces (Berchtesgaden, 17th century), rock crystal glasses (southern Germany, 17th century), etc.

FIG.42 Contemporary shells from the Hartford

cabinet of curiosities

# When and how did you start to think of creating a cabinet? I can imagine you had to work to convince your directors – how did that go?

Well, in the 1990s, we reorganised the European galleries. One new approach we took was to put more decorative arts in with the paintings than some other museums did – we didn't have a specific decorative arts gallery. But even this was still only one case with two objects and a painting. It was nothing at all like a cabinet. That's what we did in the nineties and into the early 2000s.

And then the opportunity arose to create a two-year permanent exhibition occupying the whole top floor of our European arts building, the Morgan building. I had been thinking about creating a gallery for ten or fifteen years, but I had never been able to. So in 2007, I suggested we use one whole gallery, the same gallery – where it is now, actually. We put in a fake wood floor, because I couldn't do much to the space itself. I had two hanging cases made and then another that sat on top of a monastery refectory table, where I put the Nuremburg cabinet and the ostrich, as well as the green glass vase with its base. I made a kind of tablescape with seashells. And I was given the puffer fish. The rest of the display cases were standard museum cases. This first attempt wasn't a real cabinet of curiosities, but it was really popular. We had to close that gallery for renovations, but people liked it so much that I created sort of mini versions of that in two galleries downstairs. As we were planning to redo the entire European wing, I saw an opportunity to be much more ambitious. And that's when we started planning for what you saw in Hartford.

That's such a coincidence, because it was also in 2006 that I started to introduce the cabinet of the Marquis de Robien in an exhibition of pieces from all over Brittany, as well as from the other museums, and I placed the cabinet in the exhibition as a model. I saw how well it worked and decided to display the cabinet permanently. How did you convince your directors? Did you simply say 'We need a cabinet of curiosities'?

While we were redoing the cabinet into the form you saw, a new director arrived. That was in 2008, halfway through the creation of the first cabinet, which was on display from 2007 to 2009. She had therefore already seen a basic version of it and understood how popular it was. I didn't have to persuade anybody. We just said, 'Let's try.' At that point, it was a question of planning and raising funds for it. But I didn't have to convince anyone to do it. The museum team was very enthusiastic.

# Did you also see it as an opportunity to present something quite different in the museum, to break away from classical models?

Absolutely. For the reorganisation of the European wing, we knew we wanted to do things a little differently. So all the curators got together and we discussed our vision for the whole collection, which until then had been what I would call too 'chrono-thematic'. We had many long discussions and finally agreed not to disrupt the chronology, but nevertheless set up landscape galleries and portrait galleries that would cover two or three hundred years. Without that, we all thought that visitors would be completely confused and that it wouldn't serve the artworks either. But we did want to embed certain themes into what we were doing throughout all the galleries. We chose four themes: patronage, nature and science, beliefs, and cultural encounters (Asia with the Netherlands and ceramics, for example). And in the *Kunstkammer* we retained two themes: nature and science, and beliefs. We kept these themes in mind throughout the whole reinstallation. But of course, this was perfect for the cabinet. So, in a way, the cabinet was able to recount all of history in one single gallery.

# It provides a kind of synopsis.

Exactly.

# And who established these four themes? The whole team?

It was a team effort from all the curators, as well as some of the educators, if I remember correctly. But it was really the curators who developed the themes. After many long discussions!

I think one of the things that is different about our museum, which made it easier to take this path, is that we actually started out as a true Atheneum. It was founded in 1842 and opened in 1844 as a fine arts museum, historical society, and natural history museum. There was even a precedent for our institution: in 1797, before the museum had even opened, clergyman and artist Joseph Steward (1753–1822) had created his own cabinet, in the building that was to become the Capitol of Connecticut. It contained his collection of paintings and some other natural and artificial curiosities.

# That was early for the United States.

Yes. It included minerals, medals, shells, American Indian relics, a crocodile, and a two-headed catfish. It was open to the public from 1797 to 1840, closing just two years before we were founded. So our founder, Daniel Wadsworth, must have been familiar with it.

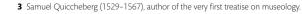
# So you have an ancestor, too, just like Robien for us in the first half of the eighteenth century.

I think these origins contributed to the museum's open-mindedness. It goes back to our roots in an interesting way.

To return to your question about the beginning of the cabinet: we have a substantial amount of funds available for acquisitions only. We don't use them for lighting or security guards, for example. And that's what allowed me to even envisage a new gallery, because I had already been thinking about a more robust installation. Then I started filling it. We had no hardstone, but we did have an amber cup. And we had new oak cases built.

# So you needed around ten years to create the cabinet?

Well, I started thinking about it quite early on. Then we started talking about the reinstallation in 2010, and it finally opened to the public in 2015. But I had been thinking about it since 2005, 2006. It was a work in progress. In 2013, we received a grant to convene a group of scholars to talk about what would be in the cabinet and what the themes would be. Mark Meadow and Bruce Robertson, the two scholars that did the translation of Quiccheberg in English, along with some other scholars, came and attended a two-day meeting. We talked about how to organise the cabinet, how we might convey all of this to our visitors, how we could create an attractive environment. The meeting was very successful and was the basis for the grant application we submitted to the National Endowment. So, all this took some time.



<sup>4</sup> American federal organisation providing art funding.



Hartford cabinet of curiosities; Anonymous, Italian, Anamorphosis of Adam and Eve, oil on canvas, late 17th century; backgammon game, Germany, 17th century, etc.





FIG.44 The Egyptian antiquities and maiolicas section of the Hartford cabinet of curiosities; Italian maiolica alabaster vases and a statue of a walking man, Venetian enamel, etc.

# Do you feel that the cabinet is now complete?

It's not easy to justify continually adding to the cabinet. It would be great to have another piece of sixteenth-century Venetian glass or a Capodimonte porcelain figure. But I have to look at the collection as a whole. And we have bought five or six pieces to expand the cabinet: the amber and ivory altarpieces (that was when you could buy ivory), the ivory cup and narwhal horn, the Goa stone holder, the Gujarat powder horn, the turned cup, the bone crucifix, and the rock crystal ewer. Now that I have bought these pieces for the museum it's hard to say we need more, like something in hardstone, for example. I've been going to the Maastricht art fair with the director and the other curators for a number of years, now. You could go past all the stands and say, 'Here's a great rock crystal ewer, that would be perfect.'

Now I would like to ask you about the relationship with the public, more specifically the educational angle you give to the cabinet. What would you like to convey through its presentation? Beyond the heritage aspect of the object in itself or its historical dimension. Do you have ways of knowing whether the visitors are capturing the spirit of the cabinet?

I don't know if they get the spirit of the cabinet or not. One of the things that I thought was really important to convey and to encourage in people is the concept of curiosity. Not curiosity in the sense of 'Look at that strange thing.' But a curiosity to know more. And I thought that was an incredibly important concept for the cabinet: the concept of learning more about your world and being curious. And so, one of the reasons we wanted to have drawers that opened was so that people would exclaim, so that they would have a sense of discovery, inspiration, and curiosity. That was really important to me. I don't know if we convey it concretely, but the idea of walking into an environment – even if it's not an authentic cabinet – is quite evocative.

I think it was really important to me for the cases to be made of oak. If I had not had the budget for it, we would have painted them black. But I didn't want it to look like a museum space. I wanted it to give visitors the feeling of what it might have been like to walk into a cabinet of curiosities. I thought of the old prints from the Athanasius Kircher cabinet, with the table, the scholars, that kind of atmosphere. I wanted people to get engaged with learning about something. So, a lot of the decisions we made in terms of the design were about that too. That concept of the desk, with the display cases with nautilus shells and glass objects in them. I was adamant that we have a place where people could sit down and engage at eye level...

# Physically?

Yes, physically and comfortably seated. And then there are the touch screens, which are the modern book, in a way. These screens were just barely slanted. They needed to look like books, so people engaged with them, to clearly evoke the acquisition of knowledge. That was the main concept: gaining knowledge, using your natural curiosity to want to know more. Those were the big ideas governing this project. There are also more concrete historical aspects, which are very interesting in my opinion, including the cabinet as the predecessor to the modern museum. Those are easier to convey. In a hundred-word panel, for instance.

**<sup>5</sup>** Athanase Kircher (1602–1680), German Jesuit scholar who constituted a renowned cabinet of curiosities at the Roman college where he taught.

Beyond that, I don't know how you can measure that, though – what people are getting out of it. It's also that interconnectedness, that global idea, which I think does correspond more to our day. The cabinet was kind of like the seventeenth-century Internet, where you had things from all over the world. You had new and wondrous objects from South America, and from the East, and creatures that you couldn't explain. All that rolled into one place. Now we have the Internet.

# The Internet is its descendant, but the nature of the tool is very important. I digress! I would also like to know if your educational team is working on the cabinet?

Yes, one of the educators in particular and several others. We produced publications. Actually, one of my assistants Vanessa Sigalas, did the one about narwhals. The team designed all the labels and one of the educators, Johanna Miller – a Kress fellow at the time<sup>6</sup> – created an interactive programme: when you click on an object, it opens the label. She wrote the first part of text so that a fifteen-year-old could understand it. Then the rest of the text is designed for adult readers.

The educational team were very involved in making that interactive programme, which allows you to build your own cabinet. We worked hand in hand. They also led the lectures and all the programmes that we did over the three years of the grant we obtained.

There were three or four programmes dedicated to beliefs, naturalia, for which we invited science historian Paula Findlen as a guest speaker. There were also musical programmes held around the cabinet.

We were partners in thinking about how to convey all this to the public, because curators sometimes – always, actually! – need that perspective from an educator to understand how people learn and what might be good tools. So we were partners and it was a very constructive collaboration.

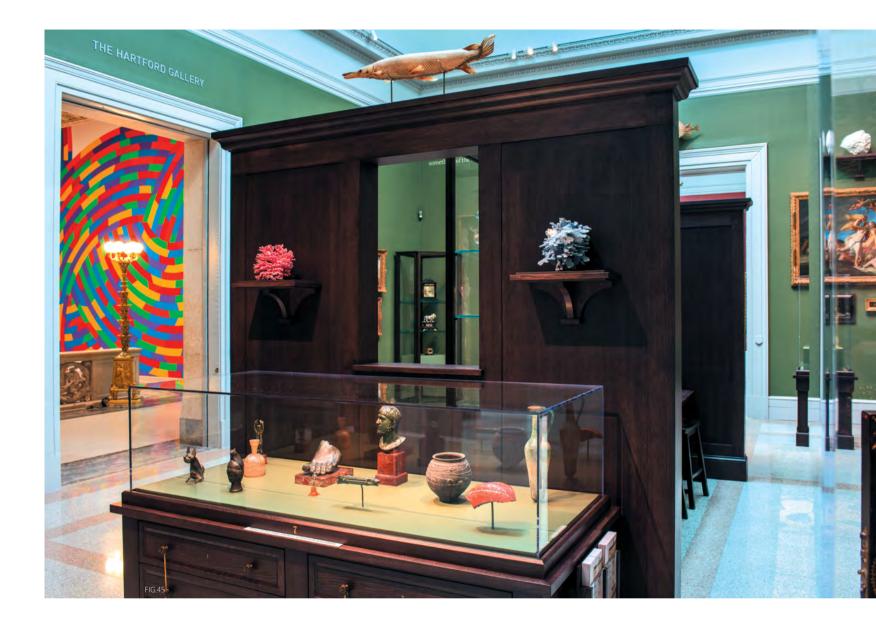
# Another more difficult question: why do you think that curiosity is so important for human beings?

That is a very tough question! I'm not so good at answering those kinds of metaphysical questions.

For instance, at the Museum of Columbus, Ohio, they answered that question in this way: 'Curiosity is very important for creativity, innovation, wealth creation, and leadership.' To me, that's a very American way of looking at it. Everyone is their own master, their own 'self-made' human, and responsible for everything.

That's my answer! [laughs].

As I'm sure you'll agree, context is important, the social origins of human beings, for instance. There have been so many poor people for so many centuries that we cannot elude the question of social context. From a European perspective, if I may be so bold, it is hard to consider that each individual is entirely responsible for their own fate. We all depend on one another. Like these lights, for instance, other people make the bulbs. The chairs, the tables, all of this comes from other people's labour. Even when we're alone, we can never



# forget the presence of others, throughout our lives. Nobody is solely responsible for their life. Chance and context also have something to do with it.

Yes, that's true. We don't operate in a vacuum. On the other hand, to achieve great things does require creativity. To give you an example, I'm on the board of trustees at my university and we just went out to California, to Silicon Valley. And we heard from a number of people in that world, we heard from an engineer at Google Brain, who told us about artificial intelligence. And they're intensely curious, these engineers, and they are making amazing strides. Like inventors who just need to invent.

**7** Google's research programme dedicated to artificial intelligence.

**FIG.45** The Roman antiquities section of the Hartford cabinet of curiosities; bronze Roman foot (1st century AD); bronze Roman weight in the shape of a head (1st century AD), etc.

**<sup>6</sup>** Created in 1929 in New York, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation provides scholarships designed for the study, conservation, history, and teaching of European art and architecture.

And one of the things that we were thinking about as a board of trustees was what's the role of a college education? Why are we teaching students history? And why are we teaching them art, music, and literature? In a world where there's so much emphasis on computer science and engineering, and all of the things that are about to happen. It was very clear after listening to all these people that understanding our history and having a perspective on our past, and understanding our present from a humanistic and ethical point of view is critical to our future. I think that the concepts of curiosity and creativity are really important for us to do great things in our future. So I think it's important to help instil a sense of curiosity in people. And they have to be curious not just about the next sort of computer science breakthrough, but also about the surrounding world, and ask themselves questions. What would happen if we become a world of driverless cars? Or what happens to all the people that lose their business, like truck drivers? Creativity and curiosity are essential.

#### This is the primary condition for adaptation.

I don't know how my little cabinet of curiosity can contribute! It's hard to convey to a visitor, but that concept of looking at the whole world, in one room...

#### 'Die Welt in der Stube.'

You have to look at the whole world. You can't just create and use artificial intelligence and move on to the next thing and create a bunch of driverless cars and put truck drivers out of business if you don't understand this, and you don't find creative ways to change things. I guess that's the big picture. I don't know how much of that gets conveyed to a museum visitor, but you never know what you're going to spark in somebody.

#### Is it a seed that you sow?

Right, that's exactly it.

For anyone who has ever visited the imperial art collections in the Palace Museum, Beijing or the National Palace Museum, Taipei, a group of curio cabinets must have immediately attracted their attentions and inspired their appreciation (FIGS.46, 47). Why is this so? These curio cabinets are furniture that hold small, interesting objects or smaller versions of objects (miniatures) and usually used on table. They are adored not only because of their beautiful external forms (outer boxes) and the great variety of artworks contained inside them in small size and/or miniature form, but also because of the whole experience of exploration and adventure involved in the process of discovering treasures in hidden drawers or mechanical settings. These curio cabinets are unique among the enormous quantity of art objects in the imperial collection of the Qing Empire, China (1644–1911).

I would like to begin the discussion by examining two select examples of curio cabinets housed in the National Palace Museum.¹ The first is 雕紫檀蟠龍方盒百什件 *Diao zitan panlong fang he baishijian*, a sandalwood chest carved with a dragon decoration, measuring 30.5 cm long by approximately 30.3 cm wide. It is 16.5 cm high, and consists of two tiers, containing forty-four items in total (FIG.46). The upper tier is decorated with calligraphy by the Qing official Yu Minzhong 于敏中 (1714–1780), and flower and bird paintings by the court painter Yang Dazhang 楊大章 (active during the Qianlong 乾隆



reign, 1736–1795). They are placed together with pieces of ancient jade in the matching shaped panels. The bottom tier contains various art objects, including small porcelain pieces, jades, cloisonée objects, calligraphy works, paintings, Japanese *maki-e* lacquer ware, and European snuff boxes. These objects are stored in spaces divided by separating partitions, and an independent curio shelf entitled *jigu hanzhen* 集古函珍 (collection of relics and precious treasures) for display is included. Hidden drawers contain porcelains, jade items, and calligraphy works and paintings. Intriguingly, two imperial calligraphy works by Emperor Jiaqing 嘉慶 (reigned 1796–1820) can also be found inside. According to the information provided by the museum, this curio cabinet was probably assembled during the Qianlong period. The fact that the imperial manuscript written by the Jiaqing emperor on the frontispiece of the calligraphy work in

FIG.46 Sandalwood chest decorated with sculpted dragons and containing forty-four objects, Qing dynasty (1644–1911); National Palace Museum, Taipei (gu za 故雜 877).

<sup>1</sup> Table curio cabinets are not exclusively confined to the NPM's collection. But those in the NPM collection have enjoyed relative better preservation conditions within their original context and publication with more detailed information in the last few decades. For instance, according to the curator in the NPM, five of seven curio cabinets with specific titles housed in the National Palace Museum are intact and can be cross-referenced to Qing court archives and museum documents (ChangTsiang-wen 張湘雯, 'Han ying ju hua: yuan cang Qinggong zhengwan duo bao ge zhong de boli wenwu 含英咀華: 院藏清宫珍玩多實格中的玻璃文物, Gugong wenwu yue jan故宫文物月刊 (Monthly Journal of National Palace Museum), vol. 422 (2018), pp. 60-77). They are hence chosen to be the centre of discussion of this paper. Other related examples wherever relevant will also be referred to. Recent publications also reveals some curio cabinets in the Palace Museum, Beijing. See Liu Yue 劉岳, 'Huangdi de xiaowanyi皇帝的小玩意, Zi jin cheng yuekan紫禁城月刊 (Forbidden City Monthly), 2014-2, pp. 120-131.

<sup>2</sup> The japanese lacquer (makie) box was already popular in the late Ming period of the sixteenth th century. It was called wuo xiang 倭箱 by contemporary literati. The imported Japanese lacquer boxes with closet and key were regarded as being highly suitable for storing antique jades and small-sized paintings and calligraphy scrolls. Smaller ones with specific shapes are as light as paper, suitable for containing small objects such as miniature scrolls, incense, and miscellaneous objects. It is advised that one should store many such boxes at home on standby. This practice was likely adopted in the Qing court, as examples of such a practice are found in the collection. See Pingpai gushi: Qianlong huangdi de wenwu shoucang yu baozhuang yishu 品牌故事: 乾隆皇帝的文物収藏與包裝藝術 (Story of a Brand Name) (Taipei, National Palace Museum, 2017), pp. 118-123. Kristina Kleutghen compares the rulers' (the Yongzheng (r. 1723-35) and Qianlong (r. 1736-95) emperors in China and Marie Antoinette (r. 1774-92) in France) shared interest in owning and imitating Japanese lacquer in the eighteenth century and suggests that it demonstrates not only the political value of possessing such rare objects, but also the different ways in which the rulers' tastes were met. Kristina Kleutghen, 'Imports and Imitations: The Taste for Japanese Lacquer in Eighteenth-Century China and France', Journal for Early Modem Cultural Studies, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2017), pp. 175-206.



FIG.47 Red sandalwood curio box with bambooveneered decoration containing twenty-three objects, Qing dynasty (1644-1911); National Palace Museum, Taipei (qu za 故雜 1284).

seal script by the official Zhao Bingchong 趙秉沖 (?-1814) and that of the landscape by Dong Gao 董誥 (1740–1818), however, suggests that this curio box was reassembled and extended by Jiaqing's imperial court.3 One would certainly be amazed by this curio cabinet, with its beautiful outer chest and great varieties of small/miniature artworks, which came from so many different places; one would feel invited to explore the hidden drawers with a spirit of adventure.

Another example of a curio cabinet is called zitanmu xiang zhusi zhuanpan gezi 紫檀 木鑲竹絲轉盤格子 (shelf of a red sandalwood box with bamboo-veneered decoration) in the Qing imperial archive, measuring 24 cm high and 18.7 cm in diameter, with twenty-three pieces of jade, paintings, and calligraphy works (FIG.47).4 The outer wall of the wooden box is spliced with bamboo strips and then embossed with bamboo flower scrolls. This box can be opened and closed in several different ways, including squared, roundel, and horizontal. The cylindrical box is divided into four sectors according to the principle of the crankshaft. With an opening of 180°, it can become a small horizontal screen, while if it is turned over 360°, it can become a square. In the latter case, each fan shape is divided into a plurality of grid layers; the cylindrical grid layer is not only divided into a plurality of grids, but can also be rotated 360°. Two of the cylindrical grid layers (the first and third) are in the style of Chinese shelves, while the other two (the second and fourth) are in the Western style, with western landscape screens decorated in the lower grid layers. The uniqueness of this example lies not only in its ingenious spacial design and masterful craftsmanship, but also in its matching textual

record in the imperial archive, enabling us to know the exact date of its assembly and installation in the thirty-first year of the Qianlong reign (1766).<sup>5</sup> In addition, apart from the small jade objects, the three painting scrolls by the court artists Fang Cong 方 琮 (active in the Qianlong period), Yang Dazhang, and Li Bingde 李秉德 (1737-1810), are only 7 cm high. In one of the triangular drawers in the centre sector, there is a small album by Jin Tingbiao 金廷標 (active in the mid-Qianlong period), which is only about 3 cm long and wide. They are arguably some of the most precious hand scrolls and albums in the National Palace Museum.

These two examples of curio cabinets represent this unique category of arts to which large amounts of attention were paid in the Qing court in compiling and organising small size and/or ancient relics, contemporary artworks and imported foreign items into objects featuring highly developed craft work and design. Though the peculiar features of curio cabinets have attracted attention among both general audiences and scholars, and although some basic analyses on their provenance and craftwork have been done, questions about these curio cabinets, especially their function and audience, still arise, and the subject is understudied.

In past studies on Qing dynasty arts, especially if they are in the relatively early stages of research, curio cabinets have been generally regarded as 'Emperors' Toy Boxes'. The primary concern lies in the curious features of these curio cabinets, the great variety of the contents and the possible provenance. The majority of the contents are collections of jade, and the provenance of these jade objects covers ancient and contemporary periods, and a wide range of geographical regions. The view that they were 'toy boxes' has been widely accepted by scholars. For instance, Hui-chun Yu, in her studies on the bronze collection of Emperor Qianlong, suggests that viewers enjoyed such treasure boxes sensually rather than intellectually.8 Recent studies, where these treasure boxes are called 'Emperors' gadgets or knickknacks', support this most common view of the use served by these curio cabinets.9

In recent years, however, scholars have paid attention to function and agency within the context of art patronage and the collecting practices of the Qing imperial rulers. They have thus tried to establish links between ruler-ship and the making of curio cabinets. We have also witnessed a new stage in the study of curio cabinets because of the increased access we now have to the Qing court archives concerning the imperial household workshops, Neiwufu zaobanchu ge zuo chengzuo huoji qing dang 內務府造 辦處各作成做活計清檔 (Imperial Household Archives, henceforth abbreviated as houji dang 活計檔),10 and the progress that has been made in the study of Qing history and arts. For instance, in her study on Qing ruling, Pamela Crossley argues that because of the Qing Empire's Central Asian nomadic roots, their ruler ship should be viewed as a 'simultaneous emperorship' over the various cultures and ideologies of the multi-

**<sup>3</sup>** Pingpai gushi: Qianlong huangdi de wenwu shoucang yu baozhuang yishu, pp. 18–19.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed introduction to this curio cabinet, see Chi Jo-tsin 嵇若昕, 'Qing neiting chenshe dang ce zhong de Qianlong chao zhusi chanzhi fanlian duobao ge yuanhe' 清內廷陳設檔冊中的乾隆朝竹絲纏枝番蓮多寶格圓盒 (sandalwood roundel box with bamboo veneered decoration in the Qing household display archives), Gugong wenwu yuekan, no. 367 (2013), pp. 26-35.

**<sup>5</sup>** See Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an guan 中國第一歷史檔案館and Xianggang zhongwen daxue 香港中文大學 ed., *Qing gong neiwu* fu zaoban chu dang'an zhonghui清宮內務府造辦處檔案總匯 (The Assorted Archives of the Workshops of the Imperial Household Department), vol. 30, pp. 202-204.

<sup>6</sup> Tsai Mei-fen 蔡玫芬, 'Hungdi's wanju xian' 皇帝的玩具箱 (Emperors' toy boxes), Gugong wenwu yue kan, vol. 13 (1984), pp. 4-7.

<sup>7</sup> Teng Shu-p'ing 鄧淑蘋, 'Doubao ge zhong de yuqi zhenwan' 多寶格中的玉器珍玩 (Jade curiosa in doubao ge), Gugong wenwu yue kan, vol. 12 (1984), pp. 23-32.

<sup>8</sup> Hui-chun Yu, 'The Intersection of Past and Present', University of Princeton, Ph.D. thesis, 2007, p. 71.

**<sup>9</sup>** Liu Yue, *op cit.*, pp. 120–131.

<sup>10</sup> Several relevant studies on curio cabinets came out alongside the display in the exhibition 'Arts from the Ch'ing Imperial Collection' 2007 in the National Palace Museum. https://www.npm.gov.tw/exh96/imperial\_collection/index.html (Latest visit: 6, November, 2018). The houji dang archives we often quote now is the edition included in the edited series of Qing gong neiwu fu zaoban chu dana'an zhonahui, mentioned above

ethnic empire, instead of being simply regarded as part of the continuum established by previous Chinese dynasties. The special exhibition China: The Three Emperors, 1662–1795 reveals how the magnificent visual arts and materials glorified the rule of the most powerful emperors of China's last dynasty. In a review article on recent studies of eighteenth–century Chinese arts, we can see that many case studies of Qing court art production have been done, and scholars of relevant fields have used them to explore the issue of global context and intercultural exchanges between the Qing empire and European countries. Enditor and European countries. The saying shang-xia wu qian nian, dong-xi shi wan li 上下五千年、東西十萬里 (up and down

The saying <code>shang-xia</code> wu <code>qiannian</code>, <code>dong-xishi</code> wan <code>li</code> 上下五千年、東西十萬里 (up and down five thousand years, East and West, a hundred thousand miles) is used by scholars to describe the wide range of the art works included in the curio cabinets, from ancient works of art to contemporary handicrafts from imperial workshops, to Japanese lacquers and Western luxury items, mechanical devices and curiosities. <sup>14</sup> Indeed, in comparison to other art objects of normal size, most of the objects in the cabinets are small or miniature. Thus one can also see the curio cabinets as a microcosm of the art world of the Qing court, <sup>15</sup> showcasing the political power that controlled such a vast land and served as the culmination of five thousand years of Chinese history. In other words, the making of curio cabinets can also be linked to the building of emperorship through visual art and materials.

This paper does not intend to cover the whole range of issues related to the curio cabinets of the eighteenth century Qing court (i.e., from issues of manufacture, to provenance, to the format and substance of the cabinets, and so forth). Instead, it aims to reshape the definition and features of this group of curio cabinets and open up a new discussion on questions concerning the handling, display, and viewing of these cabinets in order to provide a better understanding of the audience of Qing court curio cabinets. This task will be carried out by examining the outstanding features and design format used by the curio cabinets to invite viewers in to look at them, and by examining some of the interesting objects stored in them. These issues will also be examined within the context of the Qing emperors' art patronage and collecting in the early modern period. In addition to traditional Chinese formats and concepts, new elements from the West, in both design and ideas, may have contributed to the making of curio cabinets. However, due to the length limit, this issue will be omitted from the present paper. 16

#### The range of duobao ge and the 'curio cabinet'

The term duobao ge 多寶格 (meaning, literally, 'shelves or frames filled with many treasures') was generally used to refer to this group of curio cabinets in most past studies. Scholars have recently challenged this usage, given the recent publication of Qing court archives showing that the term duobao ge refers more closely to shelves for display instead of boxes with closeable lids or doors, which aim for storage rather than display.18 Other terms, such as baobei ge 寶貝格 (shelves filled with treasures) appear more frequently in the archives of Yongzheng period (1723-1735) and continued to be used into the Qianlong period. They refer to the similar function of duobao ge and bogu ge as display shelves. 19 Juzhen ge 聚珍格 (shelves gathering precious items), 20 also indicates open shelves rather than enclosed cabinets. Interestingly, if we examine the Houji dang archives, these terms seem sometimes to refer to particular locations (halls, studios or rooms) in the Forbidden City, or in the Yuan Ming Yuan 圓明園 (Summer Palace). For instance, it is called the duobao ge of Qianging gong 乾清宮 (Palace of Heavenly Purity), 21 the Bogu ge of Yangxin dian 養心殿 (Hall of Mental Cultivation), 22 and the Juzhen ge of Chunhua xuan 淳化軒 (Chamber of Chunhua).23 Duobao ge and baogu ge are also employed loosely for such large shelves in imperial households in general. We, therefore, have to be extremely careful to read the records in context in order to know what they mean in the different cases. On the other hand, the terms baishi jian 百什件/百式件/百事件 (hundreds of various articles) and wan bao xiang 萬寶 箱 (a box of ten thousands treasures) more often refer to the group of curio cabinets discussed in this paper. Indeed, baishi jian and/or wanbao xiang are the terms seen in the Qing court archives to primarily indicate the table curio cabinets discussed here, and the usage of these terms is gaining more of a consensus. The large open-shelved examples of duobao ge can be seen in the illustrations in Qing court paintings of inner court life (FIG. 48). All sorts of art objects are placed into the frames inside shelves. These large shelves are normally open, having no enclosing mechanism, and they tend to be fixed to the architecture of the interior setting, and hard to move. Such an attachedwall and/or self-standing set of shelves are closely similar to book shelves in format and scale. Such shelves can also be found in the design drawings of the interior settings of the Forbidden City, such as the Yangshi Lei (Family Lei) designs for the imperial



FIG.48 Anonymous, One of the Twelve Beauties (with detail of the lacquer box), Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Yongzheng reign (1723–1736); scroll, ink, and wash drawing on silk, 184 x 98 cm; Palace Museum, Beijing (gu za 故雜 6458-10/12).

<sup>11</sup> Pamela Kyle Crossley, A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Evelyn S. Rawski, Jessica Rawson and others, China: The Three Emperors 1662-1795 (New York, Harry N. Abrams, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> For an overall review on the progress of studies on Qing court arts, see Cheng-hua Wang, 'A Global Perspective on Eighteenth Century Chinese Art and Visual Culture', Art Bulletin (2014), 96:4, pp. 364–379.

<sup>14</sup> Chi Jo-hsin, 'Sangxia wuqian nian, dongxi shiwan li: Qinggong zhong de Baishijian 上下五千年, 東西十萬里', *Gugong wenwu yue kan*, vol. 294 (2007), pp. 4–15.

<sup>15</sup> Hui-hsia Chen, 'A Microcosm of the Art World: the Aignificance of the Treasure Box in the Imperial Ch'ing Collection', paper presented in the International Symposium 'Art in China: Collections and Concepts', Bonn, held jointly by the National Palace Museum and the University of Heidelberg, 21–23 November 2003.

<sup>16</sup> According to some scholars, curio cabinets made in the Qing court were influenced by the European ideas of exploration of the world and of building emperorship in a historical context through gathering and organising artworks in a cabinet of curiosities. Pamela Kyle Crossly, A Translucent Mirror, pp. 37–38, 276–277, 281–282; Yu Pei-chin, 'Pinwei yu yitu: Qing Qianlong 'ji qiong zao' duo bao ge chu tan 品味與意圖: 清乾「集瓊藻」多寶格初探', Gugong wenwu yuekan, vol. 294 (2007), pp. 16–27; Chang Tsiangwen, op cit, pp. 76–77.

<sup>17</sup> For instances, see Tsai Mei-fen, op cit.; Teng Shu-p'ing, op cit.; Chang Li-tuan張麗端, 'Shoucang chuwei youxi kongjian: guangyu doubao ge' 收藏趣味·遊戲空間—關於多寶格 (About doubao ge: The Taste of Collecting and the Playful Space), Gugong wenwu yuekan 故宮文物月刊, vol. 263 (2005), pp. 26–40.

<sup>18</sup> Hui-chun Yu, op cit., pp. 105–111. See also Hou Yi-lee 侯恰利's similar concept on "baogu ge"博古格(shelves filled with antiquities). Hou Yi-lee, 'Cong "baogu ge" kan Qianlong huangdi de wenwu baozhuang' 從<博古格>看乾隆皇帝的文物包裝, in Pingpai gushi: Qianlong huangdi de wenwu shoucang yu baozhuang yishu, pp. 230–233.

<sup>19</sup> Qing gong neiwu fu zaoban chu dang'an zhonghui, vol. 8, p. 296 and p. 330.

<sup>20</sup> Qing gong neiwu fu zaoban chu dang'an zhonghui, vol. 40, p. 611.

<sup>21</sup> Qing gong neiwu fu zaoban chu dang'an zhonghui, vol. 8, p. 330. Palace of Heavenly Purity is an important hall, located in the northern part of the Forbidden City. During the Qing dynasty, the palace often served as the Emperor's main audience hall, where he held council with the Grand Council.

<sup>22</sup> For instance, 'Yangxin dian dong nuan ge baogu ge chenshe' 養心殿東暖格博古格陳設, in Gugong bowuyuan 故宮博物院 ed, Gugong baowu yuan cang Qinggong chenshe dang'an 故宮博物院藏清宮陳設檔案 (archives of inventories of interior furnishing) (Beijing, Gugong chubanshe 故宮出版社, 2013), vol. 11, pp. 29–56. Hall of Mental Cultivation is a building in the inner courtyard of the Forbidden City. From the eighteen th century onward, since the reign of the Yongzheng Emperor (1723–1735), the Hall became the living quarters of the Qing emperors. The building has a front hall and a rear hall, which served as the Emperor's bedroom. In the front hall, the Emperor discussed state affairs with his mandarins.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, see *Qing gong neiwu fu zaoban chu dang'an zhonghui*, vol. 40, p. 611. Chamber of *Chunhua*, is located in the main building of the middle of Changchun Garden in the Yuan Ming Yuan architectural series. It's construction timing coincided with the completion of the 'Re-enactment of the Model Books of Calligraphy from the Imperial Archives of the *Chunhua* Reign' in 1769. *Chunhua* Chamber was named after it.

FIG.49 Anonymous, One of the Twelve Beauties, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Yongzheng reign (1723–1736); scroll, ink, and wash drawing on silk, 184 x 98 cm; Palace Museum, Beijing (gu za 故雜 6458-11/12).



court.<sup>24</sup> Examples of similar shelves in visual evidences could also be found in a section of a peculiar painting produced in the Yongzheng period likely prepared for accommodating antiquities objects.<sup>25</sup> Many of such large shelves were restored recently in the Forbidden City, such as the shelves in the Shufang zhai 漱芳齋 (Studion of Cleansing Fragrance) at the Chonghua gong 重華宮 (Palace of Many Splendours).<sup>26</sup> An extreme version of such large shelves containing art objects can be seen in the Korean Choson chaek geori 冊巨里 (chaek for book, and geori for objects or knicknacks) screen paintings, which had their origin in Chinese book shelves, but were more elaborate and may have had a remote Western connection.<sup>27</sup> We might even describe the Forbidden City itself as a giant duobao ge because of the wide range of treasure collections it held.

The term  $duobao\ ge$ , however, is employed in contemporary studies in a general way to name all sorts of treasure shelves, boxes, and cases, referring to the Qing court art collection. Here, the term  $duobao\ ge$  is more adequate to describe the nature of containers for treasure objects, and therefore I will use it as a term of more general definition to indicate the various types of treasure containers in the Qing court. Due to the limited scope of this paper, this discussion is confined to the group of table curio cabinets, instead of including all type of  $doubao\ ge$  in the Qing court. These table curio cabinets share many similarities and thus form a specific group with features that differ from other types of  $duobao\ ge$ . Table curio cabinets of  $baishi\ jian/wan\ baoxiang$  are usually no more than 50 cm by 50 cm in size, with closure settings (such as a lid or door with a lock), with many shelves/partitions in the interior (FIGS.47, 48). The outer containers of these cabinets are composed of  $gui\ mathrix{mathrix}{mathrix$ 

First, they are small in size and are thus portable and suitable exclusively to be used on a table (FIG.49), as seen in the images showing the interior life in the inner court. The cabinet was rarely free-standing; it would sit on a wooden stand (xiang ji 香八), couch (chuang 床), kang (heating) table (kang zhuo 炕桌), or shelf (ge 格), or it could stay under a desk (an 案), as suggested by scholars. At the same time, with their beautiful outer boxes, they could be regarded as one of the items to be displayed on large shelves (FIG.48, detail). As for portable and mobile features, we can see examples of a folding case with stationery objects and antiquities to be used during travelling or outings (FIG.50). Some of them can even be transformed into a table. The travelling stationery case (containing writing material and antiquities), developed in the previous dynasties, is regarded by scholars as one of the possible sources of curio cabinets. In the case of a travelling scholar, a travel case contained the utensils that a scholar would need for writing (such



FIG.50 Wooden case with travelling items, Qing dynasty, Qianlong reign (1736–1795), National Palace Museum, Taipei (*gu za* 故雜 612).

as his brush, ink, paper, seals, and so forth) and antiquities for appreciation, and travelling cases as those mentioned above could have been employed to carry objects for use during his travels (FIG.50). A case was recorded in the court archives when Emperor Qianlong, while on the way to his hunting expedition in Mulan 木蘭, north of Beijing, asked his officials to send some stationery and antiquities back to Beijing when he no longer needed them. These two thousand some objects would have facilitated the emperor's use during part of his journey. These travelling cases or tables could be viewed as travelling duobao ge or baishijian, as shown in the archive, called 'chuwai nanmu zhedie baishijian zhuo' 出外楠木折疊百十件桌(Nan wood folding table for hundreds of articles for outings) in the archive of the sixth year of Qianlong reign (1741). A painting Qianlong emperor sitting outdoors viewing a hanging scroll painting a very good example to show how these objects (including paintings) might in outings(FIG.51). Apart from the hanging scroll, various objects were displayed on a table next to the emperor and in the hands of surrounding servants. Some of the curio cabinets dis-

**<sup>24</sup>** The Lei family greatly contributed to the design and construction of imperial palaces throughout the Qing dynasty. For a review of academic studies on the Lei family, see Shi Chen and He Beijie, 'Lei Fada xin zhishi 雷發達新知識' (More Research of Lei Fada), *Gugong baowuyuan yuankan*, no. 156(2011), pp. 81–94.

<sup>25</sup> The most impressive part of these shelves is that the frames inside the shelves are in the form of objects. See Shane McCausland, 'The Emperor's Old Toys: Rethinking the Yongzheng (1723-35) Scroll of Antiquities in the Percival David Foundation,' *Transactions of Oriental Ceramic Society*, no. 66 (2001-2), pp. 65–75, fig. 9.

<sup>26</sup> For a picture, see https://www.ebaomonthly.com/window/arts\_literature/arts/architecture/Palace/ch5/pl5\_1603.htm (Latest visit: 11 February 2019)

<sup>27</sup> Examples of these paintings can be seen in many collections of Korean arts. For instance, Kumja Paik Kim, The Art of Korea: Highlights from the Collection of San Francisco's Asian Art Museum (Stanford, San Francisco's Asian Art Museum, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Hui-chun Yu, 2007: 101; Li Fumin, 'Gugong Juanqinzhai chenshedang zhi yi' 故宮倦勤齋陳設檔之一(One of the Chengshe dang archives about the Study of Retired life in the Palace Museum), Gugong baowuyuan yuankan 故宮博物院院刊 (Palace Museum Journal), 2004 (2): pp. 125-151

**<sup>29</sup>** Hui-hsia Chen, 2003; Chang Li-tuan, op cit.; Liu Yue, op cit., p. 122.

**<sup>30</sup>** Chen Kuo-tung 陳國棟, 'Neiwufu guangyuan de waipai, wairen: yu Qianlong gongting wenwu gongji zhijian de guangxi' 內務府官員的外派、外任——與乾隆宮廷文物供給之間的關係 (Imperial Bondservants' Provincial Positions and Their Contribution to the Acquisition of Objects d'Arts for Emperor Qianlong's Court), *Taida Meishushi jianjiu jikan* 台大美術史研究集刊, no. 33, pp. 225–269.

**<sup>31</sup>** Qing gong neiwu fu zaoban chu dang'an zhonghui, vol. 10, pp. 91–94.

cussed in this paper could also be employed as such travelling cabinets. One could regard the features of the table curio cabinets as partially overlapping with travelling cases, but also independent in their own right, as they were exclusively employed on a table or desk, relating to art collecting and patronage, and designed to house and display small sized and miniature art objects.

Second, curio cabinets are no doubt also related to art collecting and patronage at the imperial court, and seen as a type of duobao ge for storing small sized/miniature art objects. The range of their contents more or less mirrors the large shelf-type duobao ge, and perhaps also refers to the imperial art collection in Qianqing Palace. 32 The gathering of a great variety of materials and forms, antiques and Qing contemporary works, Japanese lacquer wares and Western objects (FIG.46), is also one of the essential features in large shelves of duobao ge (FIGS.48, 50). In addition, according to the evidence in the Qing court archives, objects of similar rank and size in the large duobao ge shelves can be swapped with their counterparts in table curio cabinets and those in the art collection in the Palace of Heavenly Purity when necessary.<sup>33</sup> However, the projects of art collecting, and the production and organisation of art collections in the Palace of Heavenly Purity show a single taxonomy, in comparison to the project called Scrolls of Antiquities 古玩圖, where 'the objects portrayed are described as wan, "playthings" or "trinkets" (or gewgaws, knick-knacks, bibelots, or toys), essentially distractions from the serious business of ruling, that it was important for emperors to be known to possess and enjoy responsibly.'34 Guwan (antiquities) were regarded as the primary content of curio cabinets, while newly produced contemporary artworks from imperial workshops, and imported European curiosities, were also included. It is worth noting that many Western objects, such as watches, snuff boxes, glassware, toilette sets, measurement sets, and science instruments (such as the telescope), found their homes in the duobao ge rather than in other storage places in the Forbidden City except for the Western quarter of the Yuan Ming Yuan.

Thematic cases of objects made from a single material or of a single type, accompanied by an illustrated catalogue, were sometimes regarded as a type of  $duobao\ ge$ . They were placed into caskets with an apparent theme (such as being made of a single material), and were sometimes accompanied by one or more serious studies and colour drawings of each object in a realistic style, resembling a catalogue. We can see bronze and ceramic sets with catalogues containing both text and illustrations, such as the box of  $Fan\ jin\ zuo\ ze\$ 范金作則 (cast bronze models) and the box of  $Jin\ tao\ yun\ gu\ 精陶蘊古$  (elegant ceramics to venerate the ancients). Although the outermost boxes of these sets all have lids that close and function as storage for art objects, they are normally plain, without much decoration. The jade sets do not have separate catalogues but there are drawings of the actual objects underneath the actual objects, as in the example called  $Yi\ tong\ che\ shu\ -$ 統軍書 (complete unity) in the Palace Museum. It consists of a lacquer box painted with gold, and 450 jades in forty-five small drawers, each of which contains ten jades and an illustrated list of all sorts of jade items. Although there is no catalogue to go with it, scholar suggests that the -統軍書 box itself might be counted as



FIG.51 Giuseppe Castiglione (known as Lang Shining 郎世寧, 1688–1766), Hongli Looking at Paintings (Hongli guanhua 弘曆觀畫), Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong reign (1736–1795); scroll, ink, and wash drawing, 132.5 x 62.6 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing (qu za 故雜).

**<sup>32</sup>** For the introduction of projects for organizing the imperial art collection in early Qianlong period, see Hui-chun Yu, *opcit.*, pp. 75–85; Yu Pei-chin, 'Rugu hanjin: yi Qianlong chuqi Qianqing gong peixia he fendeng diancang jihua weili茲古含今—以乾隆初期 乾清宮配匣和分等典藏計畫為例,' *Pingpai gushi: Qianlong huangdi de wenwu shoucang yu baozhuang yishu*, pp. 276–297.

<sup>33</sup> Qing gong neiwu fu zaoban chu dang'an zhonghui, vol. 53, p. 695. See also Liu Yue, op cit, p. 125.

**<sup>34</sup>** Shane McCausland, op cit, p. 68.









FIGS.52 to 55 Box with separations containing various types of jade, a Japanese *maki-e*, an inventory notebook, and a small stone case with a painted and enamelled miniature (*li qiongzao* 集瓊藻), Palace Museum, Beijing (*gu za* 故雜 356).

a 'real catalogue'. There are no hidden drawers or mechanical settings in the thematic duobao ge. The major function of the outer box is to contain the rest of the collection. Scholars have observed that, unlike the thematic sets, which have a logical taxonomy, the curio cabinet is obviously more casual and playful. In contrast to the thematic boxes, the curio cabinet manifests Qianlong's urge to gather objects rather than to classify, narrate, or decipher them. There may be no serious principle behind the interior design and the content of objects were placed in and out randomly. This is not to say that there are no serious reasons behind these table curio cabinets collection. On the contrary, because there is a limited space within the enclosing mechanism, you have to take something out if you want to put something back in. In addition, possession



FIG.56 The first purse of Empress Xiaoxian (1692–1777) given to Emperor Qianlong (1736–1795), National Palace Museum, Taipei (*gu za* 故雜 225).

and announcing ownership are ways by which emperors enforced their ruler-ship. On the other hand, the process of gathering guwan is essentially a distraction from the serious business of ruling, as mentioned above. There is a so-called guwan dang 古玩 檔 (archive for antiquities), compiled from 1773 to 1775, which is a small portion of the huoji dang dedicated to the renovation of the Ningshou Gong 寧壽宮 (Palace of Tranquil Longevity), Emperor Qianlong's retirement resort. In this guwan dang archive one can see the emperor's orders for the manufacture of new furniture, the installation of antiquities, the assemblage of shelves for display, and so forth.<sup>37</sup> Some references are also made to emperors Kangxi and Yongzhen, showing that this practice was adopted in the Qing court before the Qianlong reign. 38 Early in his reign, Emperor Qianlong took up this practice from previous dynasties and earlier generations, but modified it by introducing new ideas, such as creating cabinets with specific titles. For instance, we have Tianfu qiulin 天府球琳 (beautiful jades from heaven), Tianqiu hebi 天球合璧 (jade sphere of heaven and matching jade bi disk), Langgan ju 瑯玕聚 (meeting of pearl-like stones), Ji qiong zao 集瓊藻 (assembly of various jades), Wanjan ji 琬琰集 (assembly of gorgeous jades), Qiongyao sou 瓊瑤藪 (gathering of precious jades) and Jinyu xia 瑾瑜匣 (case of marvelous jades), completed in the tenth month of the seventh year of Qianlong's reign, 39 and all related to gathering and appreciating beautiful jade objects. In addition, the urge to gather and organize jade pieces is probably the primary driver behind the appearance of the table curio cabinet.

Third, the objects chosen for the curio cabinets need to be small or miniature to be placed into such limited spaces. If we agree that curio cabinets derived from the urge to store small objects and miniature artworks, they functioned like a jewellery box. Small jades and porcelain items, snuff bottles, seals, and small objects from Europe, such as watches, miniature paintings (painted enamel), and snuff boxes, are almost essential objects for curio cabinets to contain. The *Ji xiongzao* cabinet is a good exa-

<sup>35</sup> Nicole Jiang 蔣得莊, 'Qianlong huangdi shoucang zai sikao 乾隆皇帝收藏再思考', Gugong wenwu yuekan, no.3 68 (2013), pp. 34-43.

<sup>36</sup> In the grouping of curio cabinets of baishi jian boxes, Hui-chun Yu's studies on collection of bronzes in the Qing court is also helpful for the differentiation in term of concepts. Yu considers that the group of curio boxes 'indicates creative, pleasing, humorous, varied and entertaining; rarely did they follow a single principal of taxonomy, not referring to any unitary cataloguing system or to previously catalogued works, self-referential rather than inter-referential'. See Hui-chun Yu, op cit., p. 71.

<sup>37</sup> Qing gong neiwu fu zaoban chu dang'an zhonghui, vol. 36, pp. 227-283.

**<sup>38</sup>** A few cases of *baishijian* curio cabinets containing antiquities assembled in late Kangxi and Yongzhen periods were recorded in the Qing court archives. For the original text, see *Qing gong neiwu fu zaoban chu dang'an zhonghui*, vol. 1, p. 189 and vol. 4, p. 141–151. See also Chi Jo-hsin, *op cit*. (2007), pp. 4–15 and Liu Yue, *op cit*., p. 123.

<sup>39</sup> Qing gong neiwu fu zaoban chu dang'an zhonghui, vol. 11, p. 650 and vol. 12, pp. 581-582.





FIG.57 One of ten small miniature boxes and its contents, located in the  $Ji\ qiongzao$  ivory box, Qianlong reign (1736–1795); sculpted and openwork ivory,  $1.7\times4.1\times2.8$  cm (dimensions of the box that contains it); National Palace Museum, Taipei ( $gu\ za$  故雜 129).

FIG.58 Small *Tianqiu hebi* cabinet, gilt lacquered wooden box decorated with dragons and phoenixes, containing various elements in drawers with separators, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong reign (1736–1795), National Palace Museum, Taipei (qu za 故雜 482).

mple of such plentiful contents (FIGS.52 to 55). In other words, curio cabinets are essential homes for these bibelots in the Qing court. For instance, miniature paintings were employed as small pockets for holding flints, which were supposed to be essential for the Manchu way of life. Important symbolic connotations for Manchu identity developed from these, as seen from the flint purse made with threads from deer tail fur, instead of golden threads, reminding the Manchu rulers of their life of poverty before they came to power in China. This purse was made by Empress Xiaoxian 孝賢 herself, and given to Emperor Qianlong (FIG.56). Expressing the intimate personal emotions between husband and wife, combined with ethnic and political identity, the flint purse (containing flint and striker) was actually kept in a sandal wood box and lacquer case, with a note by the emperor of Qianlong in Manchu and Chinese.

In my earlier studies of ivory works in the Qing court, I found that most of these  $xiangong \Leftrightarrow \bot$  (works by immortals), tiny or miniature objects, were often placed in the curio cabinets at the Qing court. For instance, in the Ji qiong zao curio cabinet mentioned above, the inventory attached to it says there were at least three 'works by immortals' included in it, though only the ivory box has survived. Inside this ivory box, made in the fourth year of Qianlong's reign (1738), miniature ivory items with chains to link them were placed inside small ivory boxes, and all the small ivory boxes

were placed inside a larger ivory box (the largest one being  $1.7 \times 2.8 \times 4.1 \text{ cm}$ ). A delicate ivory roundel box with interlocking thread decoration ( $1.8 \times 2.2 \text{ cm}$ ) made in the third year of Qianlong (1739) is housed in the *Tianqiu hebi* curio cabinet (**FIG.58**).

Interestingly, although the need for storing and preserving small things may have been the primary practical function of these curio cabinets, some of them also possess the function of display to some extent. Curio cabinets with such a display function were thus called <code>gezi</code> 格子 (shelves) (See <code>FIG.47</code>). In addition, some had a mechanism like a turntable (<code>zhuanpan</code> 轉盤). An example of this kind can be seen in the Palace Museum, Beijing, where there is a curio cabinet made of red sandalwood with painting and calligraphy decoration and a folding mechanism. <sup>42</sup> We can extend this point by noticing that there are two main groups of curio cabinets, one having storage as the primary concern and the other being mainly for display. In addition, cabinets essentially for storage could occasionally be opened up for display in galleries, and the objects are all taken out to invite viewers to see and appreciate them despite their obvious closure features of lid, door, or lock. Thus even though they are for storage, they can also be displayed.

Fourth, to follow up on the previous idea of inviting viewers to take a look, their curiosity about the objects themselves (the miniature, small, wondrous, and exotic things; the hidden drawers and folding mechanisms) entices them to use their hands to touch, handle, and explore the secrets embedded in the cabinets. In the other words, the viewers were curious about the objects themselves as well as the boxes, hidden drawers, and folding mechanisms. These objects then become intimate to their users and viewers. In addition, they are not only designed to entice the viewers to examine them, but the contents also establish an intimate relationship between the owner and viewers, as shown in the case of the flint purse made by Empress Xiaoxian for Emperor Qianlong. There are important items of memorabilia stored and displayed in the Chonghua Gong Palace; they are full of memories about the beloved members of his family who were lost, including his wife, parents, and grandparents. The display of objects was actually designed by Emperor Qianlong to be viewed, and to be memorised by imperial successors. 43 The objects were chosen not because of their aesthetic value or precious materials but because they could convey important family memories to the imperial family. They included, for instance, the toys given to Qianlong by his father, Emperor Yongzheng, and the wardrobe that was brought as a dowry by his wife, Empress Xiaoxian. A display gallery was created there for these memorable

When it comes to the enclosing mechanism of table curio cabinets, Hui-chun Yu observes that the mechanism and explains that they do not allow a viewer to see the objects inside without first opening the seal. In addition, tiers of trays are used to separate the interior spaces and each tray is further divided into many niches by small wooden partitions. This mechanism fits one of the criteria for curiosities in many cultures: it allows the viewer to see hidden things. At the same time, it is an important feature of this group of curio cabinets because it invites viewers to open the lid or door,

**<sup>40</sup>** Fung Ming-chu 馮明珠ed., *Qianlong huangdi de wenhua da yie* 乾隆皇帝的文化大業 (Emperor Ch'ien-lung's Cultural Enterprise) (Taipei, National Palace Museum, 2000).

<sup>41</sup> Ching-fei Shih 施靜菲, "Zishi guigong shuo, nenchuan xianke qing": Qianlong chao gongting de xiangya "xiangong" 「自是鬼工手,能傳仙客情」: 乾隆朝宮廷的象牙「仙工」(From the Hands of Spirits, Conveying the Quality of Immortals: Ivory 'Immortal Works' from the Qianlong Court), *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宫學術季刊 (The National Palace Museum Research Quarterly), vol. 34, no. 1 (2016), pp. 93-151.

**<sup>42</sup>** Liu Yue, op cit., pp. 124–125.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Elliot (translated by Qing Shi), Qianlong Di 乾隆帝(*Emperor Qianlong: Son of Heaven, Man of the World*) (Beijing, Shehui kexue wenxian chuban she 社會科學文獻出版社, 2014), pp. 245–246; Yang Yong 楊勇and Liu Yue 劉岳, 'Dumu yongsi yongzhao shishuo: Gugong shuocang de yucipin' 篤慕永思用昭世守:故宮收藏的御賜品, Shoucangjia 收藏家, 2013, no. 7, pp. 3–14.

**<sup>44</sup>** Hui-chun Yu, *op cit.*, pp. 99–100.

**FIG.59** Map of the palace in the Forbidden City, early 20th century.

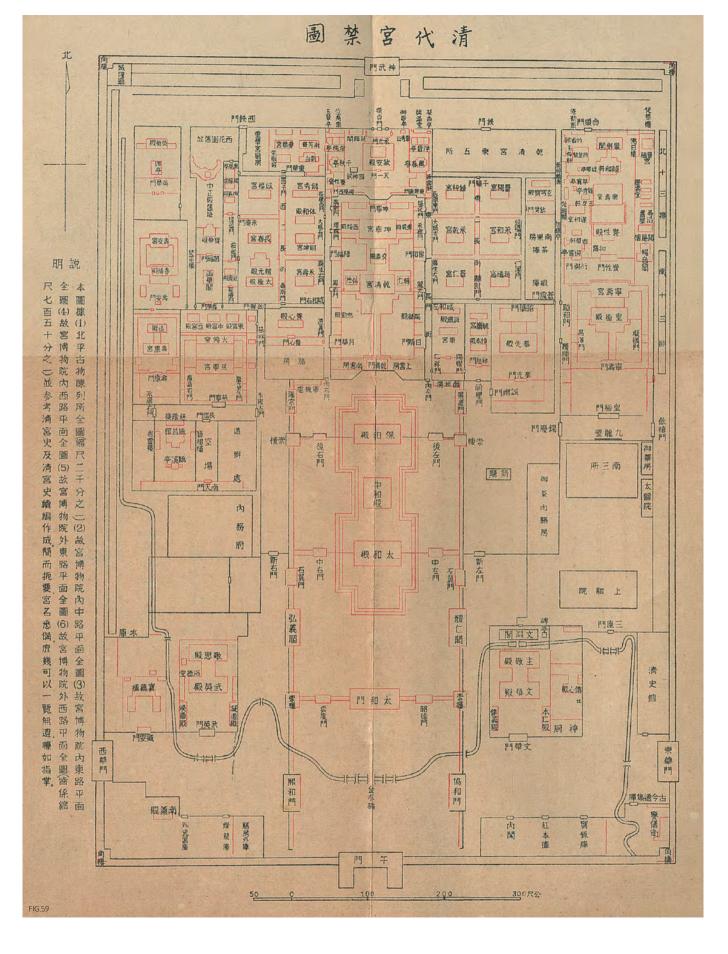
to unlock it and explore what is hidden inside: the miniature 'works by the immortals', hidden drawers and compartments, folding mechanisms, and so forth.

The focus of this research is on the private and intimate spaces of the emperors, where these table curio cabinets were stored and displayed. According to the archives, we know that the majority of these are in Yangxin dian Palace, Emperor Qianlong's studio and bedroom, and Ningshou gong Palace, Emperor Qianlong's retirement resort, while the other boxes are located in the rooms for court ladies, such as Cue yun guan 翠雲館 in the rear hall of Chonghua gong Palace, and Shoukang gong 壽康宮(Palace of Longevity and Health), the residence of Empress Dowager Chongging (mother of Emperor Qianlong) and so on. 45 They are all located in the inner court, which is separate from the outer court, the site of the public offices for governmental affairs in the Forbidden City. The references in the above-mentioned inventories of palace displays, Chenshe dang also support these original locations though the precise identification of curio cabinets containing objects with present museum collections relied on the publications of further detailed cataloguing information provided by the Palace Museums in Beijing and Taipei. One wonders who the targeted audience was for this group of table curio cabinets? They seem to be linked with the domestic inner court and women's spaces. For instance, a lacquer box with gold paintings, which could be identified as a curio cabinet, was inserted in the duobao ge shelf and depicts the Twelve Beauties (FIG.48) mentioned above. More examples can be found in the same series of paintings. For instance, one such painting is found on a lacquer box with inlay decoration placed on the desk (FIG.49). There is also a Western pocket watch held in the hand of a court lady. (The majority of Western pocket watches, mirrors, and toilette sets in the Qing court collections were located in curio cabinets, as mentioned above.

#### The Toys(?) of the Court Ladies

The above discussion attempts to define the range of table curio cabinets by examining their outstanding features. *Duobao ge or baishi jian*, in general, are shelves or drawers containing various treasured objects. In this paper I have confined my discussion to table curio cabinets, one of a particular type of *duobao ge*. According to the textual evidence, this type of treasure cabinet appeared in the late Kangxi period and continued throughout the Yongzheng, Qianlong, and into the Jiaqing periods, while the Qianlong reign should be regarded as the peak of production. Exploring the format, structure, and content of these items has improved our understanding of this particular type of cabinet in the eighteenth-century Qing court.

Now we may be in a better position to explore further the identity of the intended viewer of Qing court curio cabinets. Curio cabinets in the eighteenth century Qing court are normally no more than 50 cm by 50 cm in size, and designed to be placed on a table. The outer containers consist of beautiful or decorative seal chests or boxes with a liftable lid/a door, or a casket with a liftable lid, made of hard wood, carved lacquer or Japanese *maki-e*. Interiors were organised by small partitions, hidden drawers and/or a folding mechanism. The purpose of this design was perhaps to create a place to organise small objects, as is the main function of a jewellery casket with a lid or door. Thus the primary goal of these cabinets was probably to gather and organise



**<sup>45</sup>** See 清室善後委員會Qingshi shanhou wuiyuan hui (Committee for the Disposition of Qing's Imperial Possessions), ed., *Gu gong wu pin dian cha bao gao* 故宮物品點查報告 (*Palace Items Auditing Report*) (Beijing: Xian zhuang shu ju線裝書局, 2004).

FIG.60 Chen Mei 陳枚 (1697–1745), A scene from The Pursuit of Pleasures in the Course of the Seasons (Yueman qingyou 月曼清遊), Qing dynasty (1644–1911), règne de Yongzheng (1644–1911), Yongzheng reign (1723–1735); scroll, ink, and wash drawing on silk, 37 x 31.8 cm; Palace Museum, Beijing (gu za 故雜 00009224-11/12).



small-size collectables and bibelots, the majority of which were small jade items. These were then matched with other objects selected from the imperial collection or reproduced in small or miniature size. The archives show that swapping objects was a common occurrence.

The original format of these cabinets and the ideas behind them were likely to have been inherited from past efforts (perhaps in the Ming dynasty) to gather antiquities or organise stationery items for travelling literati. However, with their modified, decorative outer boxes, their designs adhering to the structural requirements of curiosities and their new contents, one cannot simply regard them as belonging to the continuity, of the past, which was probably limited to gathering antiquities and providing portable stationery cases. The saying, 'Up and down five thousand years, East and West, one hundred thousand miles', mentioned above, aptly describes the wide range of art work contained in them, which not only mirrored the entire imperial art collection,

but also showcased the political power of the imperial house and the cultural entities it inherited from the past. The numerous jade objects in these table cabinets enforces the idea of empire-building, since this material from the New Territories (Xinjiang 新疆) was full of political connotations highlighting Qianlong's imperial conquest. It has been pointed out that 'gifts of jade that headed the Chinese gift list' (to the British Embassy) were a reminder of the conquest of Xinjiang, as were the pictures of Qing battles. We should not omit that 'a box of rose-wood, on the side are ornaments of steatite in relief; within are specimens of different kinds of jade', and a Chinese treatise on plants is included in the diplomatic gifts in the gift list of from Emperor Qianlong to King George III. George III.

Compiling and organising these curio boxes in the Qing court had a serious purpose, even though the format and practice were geared towards leisure, and the objects were flexible in comparison to those with a serious taxonomy, such as the thematic cases of bronzes, coins, seals, and porcelain boxes with an obvious orderly arrangement and catalogues. Good examples can be seen in those with inventories and formal titles, such as *Ji xiongzao* (FIGS.52 TO 55) and *Tianqiu hebi* (FIG.58), mentioned above, put together with ancient relics, contemporary artworks of imperial pride (painted enamels, ink-stones made of Sunhua stone from the imperial home town, glassware, jades and so on), samples of the emperors' calligraphy or paintings, and small art objects and tools from Japan and the West. The objects are small but important, representing the legitimacy of Qing rule, and their viewers were limited, probably consisting only of royal family members.

Large shelves such as the *duobao ge* in Qianqing gong Palace, the main reception hall of the Forbidden City, or the *Baogu ge* in Yangxin dian Palace containing many treasures are designed for display. They can be viewed from a distance by a large number of viewers at a time. By contrast, curio cabinets are suitable for handling one at a time and they are designed to be viewed intimately. In addition, they are mostly found in the inner court, where emperors and imperial women are present (FIG.59).

Considering the small size of the objects themselves, their curious features and the mechanical design of the cabinets, it is likely that these cabinets were seen from a very short distance by a small group of viewers. Boxes and objects were even handled by the viewers, and often played with, allowing them to experience the textures of surfaces and to explore the secrets in the hidden drawers, as well as the miniature items themselves (the small jade items, delicate 'immortal works', nuts with micro-carving and objects hidden in small boxes). In addition, new elements, such as miniature 'immortal works' of ivory, Western miniature paintings, purses and toilette sets suggest not only curiosities but also feminine viewers. This view is further supported by the locations where these curio boxes were kept: in the inner court. Images of such cabinets in the private female space are also seen in paintings and on the cabinets (FIGS.48, 49). The activities of women in the inner court were also shown in scroll paintings, and afterwards in ivory albums (FIG.60). If we seriously consider that the context of curio cabinets was within the emperor's domestic life in the inner court, in addition

<sup>46</sup> Wang Yi-wen 王怡文, 'Qianlong chao gongting yuqi de zai quanshi' 乾隆朝宮廷玉器的再詮釋 (The Re-interpretation of Jade in Qianlong Empire), MA Thesis, Graduate Institute of Art History, National Taiwan University, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Henrietta Harrison, 'Chinese and British Diplomatic Gifts in the Macartney Embassy of 1793', English Historical Review, vol. CXXXIII no. 560 (2018), p. 86.

**<sup>48</sup>** Ming Wilson, 'Gifts from Qianlong Emperor to King George III', *Oriental Arts*, January to February 2017, pp. 33–42.

to regarding them as a microcosm of the Qing Empire, the court's collection, its cultural achievements, then in addition to viewing the emperor as the owner of the collection and the designer of such cabinets, should we not also consider the wives of the emperor, who were also taking part as patrons or potential viewers, even though this is not documented in the records?<sup>49</sup> These table curio cabinets would certainly be able to surprise their viewers with the delicate beautiful items they contained, the hidden drawers, and unexpected folding mechanisms. We are sure that the emperors would be the ones to direct the viewers if they could not figure out the right way to explore the secrets embedded in these cabinets. The emperors not only played the role of the respected scholar-collector but also that of the emperor husband of his court ladies, who would show these 'toys' to them.

<sup>49</sup> Compared with emperors, the lives of imperial woman is much understudied and difficult to retrieve as there is limited written evidences. It is only in recent studies and exhibitions that attempts have been made to reveal the lives of imperial woman from the visual and material cultures. See Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuart ed., Empresses of China's Forbidden City, 1644–1912 (Yale University Press, 2018). I could foresee more studies will be done in the future about this issue...

# ROBIEN'S CABINET AND MACQUARIE'S CHEST

While curiosity is traditionally the province of Renaissance studies, best expressed through those European cabinets of art and wonder known as Kunst and Wunderkammern, much has been made in both museum and art historical contexts of the 'return' of curiosity. In his book The Return of Curiosity: what Museums Are Good for in the 21st Century, anthropologist and historian Nicholas Thomas cites curiosity as an abiding human attribute, or ailment, one that has been valued differently over time. He tracks the impact of colonisation and capitalism on curiosity, and its return, but cites as his focus the public's contemporary re-enchantment with the museum. He asserts that the museum 'holds out the promise of a place and space richly peopled by works and things, a realm in which you can pursue interest and discover interests you did not know you had, not alone, but in company - that is, in the company of strangers'.2 The cabinet of Christophe-Paul de Robien, seized in the late eighteenth century from a private collection (from Robien's son) and preserved intact has made this transformative transition - from private wonder to public display - and today curiosity is rekindled at the Musee des Beaux Arts de Rennes in Brittany. The shift from private to public in the case of Robien's cabinet occurred at the same time as the British colonisation of Australia where curiosity clearly had a hold. The experience of terra australis stultified the European Enlightenment. Early letters exemplify a transitional consciousness on the cusp of the period between the Enlightenment and the Romantic eras. In 1794 artist, author and convict Thomas Watling writes:



<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 63. This description of the contemporary museums resembles the descriptions of sixteenth and seventeenth century Wunderkommern



[T]he air, the sky, the land, are objects entirely different from all that a Briton has been accustomed to see before...the generality of the birds and the beasts sleeping by day, and singing or catering [sic] in the night...[to be]...such an inversion in nature as is hitherto unknown.<sup>3</sup> Watling's letters also communicate his perception of terra australias an enormous open air and, in his words, 'luxuriant' museum, filled with novelties and ripe for the curious collector:

[S]hould the curious Ornothologist [sic], or the prying Botanist, emigrate here, they could not fail of deriving ample gratification in their favorite pursuits in this luxuriant museum. Birds, flowers, shrubs and plants; of these, many are tinged with hues that must baffle the happiest efforts of the pencil. ¾ Quadrupeds are by no means various; but we have a variety of

**FIG.61** Macquarie Collectors' Chest ca. 1818, Australian red cedar (Toona ciliata), NSW rosewood (*Dysoxylum fraserianum*), brass fittings, oil paint, glass and brass fittings, 56 x 71.3 x 46.5 cm, Mitchell Collection, State Library of NSW, Sydney.

<sup>3</sup> WATLING, 1992, p. 23.

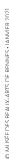




FIG.62 Ferrante Imperato (1525-1615), Ritratto del museo di Ferrante Imperato..., Dell'historia Naturale de Ferrante Imperato, Napolitano libri XXVIII, in Napoli nella Stamparia a Poerta Reale, per Costantino Vitale, 1599; private collection.

fishes, the greater part of which, are dropped and spangled with gold and silver, and stained with dyes transparent and bralliant [sic] as the arch of heaven.<sup>4</sup>

Made at least two hundred years after its equivalents *Kunst* and *Wunderkammern* were in steady circulation in the northern hemisphere, the Macquarie Collectors' Chest was made in the penal colony of New South Wales in the years following the French Revolution. The multifarious contents of the chest suggest that the pre-Enlightenment regime of curiosity as the pursuit of information via empirical means had a hold on the colonial imagination. Today, like the Robien Collection, the private has been made public and the Chest is held in the collection of the State Library of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia.

4 Ibid.

This composite object condenses the experience of the new world into 'one world shut' and can be viewed as the first museum, albeit miniature, of the colony. Built not for public exhibition but for private, sensorial pleasure and vicarious tourism, the chest conceals drawers of antipodean *naturalia* (the wonders of nature), *exotica* (including curiosities from foreign lands), and *artificialia* (virtuoso examples of human craftsmanship).<sup>5</sup>

Assembled around 1818 in Australia's secondary penal settlement and convict outpost of Newcastle, approximately 160 kilometres north of Sydney in New South Wales, the Macquarie Collectors' Chest (FIGS.64 to 67) is crafted in the manner of campaign styling and is made from native timber, opening to reveal drawers, trays, and panels of paintings, natural history specimens, and artifacts. When opened the unadorned outward appearance of the chest gives way to a complex network of panels, drawers, boxes, trays, and compartments that require activation and even demonstration to explain and negotiate the various components.

Historian Barbara Stafford suggests that such collections functioned anamorphically to the degree that their puzzling contents 'awaited resolution in the delectating vision of the beholder'. In considering tactile engagement with the chest, one is reminded of the engraving of the frontispiece of the *Wunderkammer* of sixteenth-century Neopolitan apothecary Ferrante Imperato, where the collector and curator is shown *in action* (FIG.62). Imperato is depicted gesticulating to his visitors the wonder of his curiosities. Hence this earlier culture of curiosity is, like the experience of the Macquarie Collectors' Chest, activated and thereby controlled by the owner who is at once collector, connoisseur, and curator.

- **5** These categories are introduced in Chapter One and are derived primarily from KEMP, 1995, pp.177-196.
- 6 STAFFORD, 1994, p. 238.



FIG.63 Engraved and openwork nautilus shell (*Nautilus ompilius*, Linnaeus, 1758), from the Pacific Ocean region, Flanders, early 17th century; 13.5 x 18 x 8.3 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.449).









Commissioned for, and possibly by, Governor Lachlan Macquarie and his wife Elizabeth, it is likely that the chest evolved over months, possibly years, of collaboration involving an interwoven network of agents including convicts, collectors, commandants, artists, and artisans, including Aboriginal people. This miniature museum, in its sheer spectacle, profusion, and excess, startles one's expectations of an early Australian convict outpost. The chest offers a discrete and locally nuanced iteration of curiosity and through its contents, design, collaborative collecting practices, and nebulous construction context, the Macquarie Collectors' Chest embodies a specific inflection of curiosity in the antipodes.

Panels painted by convict artist Joseph Lycett are intrinsic to both the form and the function of the Macquarie Collectors' Chest and can be compared to the painted panels of the multi-purpose furniture pieces, including the now legendary Kunstschrank, composed by Philip Hainhofer in Uppsala and presented to King Gustavus Adolphus in 1632. In the Kunstschrank, as in the Macquarie Collectors' Chest, the paintings play an active role in the unfolding memory theatre, enabling the beholder to 'travel' in

time to the scene. Opening the chest, one immediately becomes an intrepid traveller in both time and place. The largest of the paintings forms a protective cover for the inner showcases. A catch of freshly caught fish dominates the composition with both scenes clearly anchored in the sandstone environments of the east coast of New South Wales.

The painted fish prepare the beholder for the experience within: sea sponges, barnacles, egg sacks, seaweeds, and coralline algae occupy two secret drawers on either side of the chest and all of the specimens are laid out decoratively in a radiating pattern. Two drawers with in-set glazed cases continue the thrall of the shell and the beholder's attention is focused not only on the shells in their miraculous form but also on their entertaining and eye-appealing method of display. The central placement of the twin paper nautilus (Argonaut) within the gilded dividers underscores the decorative placement and patterning at work in this ark from the new world. A carved Nautilus pompilius from the early seventh century is a prized object within Robien's cabinet. One of the most sought-after objects of the Wunderkammer, this Pacific Rim treasure reminds us that marine life was prized for its talismanic powers, protecting against the evil eye and illness.

Concealed in the top compartment of the Chest in four gilt edged and glazed boxes, protected by four painted panels, are 250 insect specimens, including fifty-six butterflies and moths. In near perfect condition, the kaleidoscopic placement features a central, radiating design, consistent with specimen boxes popular across Europe in the nineteenth century. These boxes replay the display tactics at works in earlier collections, seen readily in Jan van Kessel's oil painting in the Robien Collection that uses trompe l'oeil to recreate a collector's specimen tray.

Lying 'cheek by jowl' within two deep trays or contained 'top to tail' within two small glazed drawers with dividers, the plumage of the birds is as brilliant as if these twohundred-year-old specimens had just fallen from the sky. The larger specimens, forty-three in total, are not under glass but rather are portable, placed within trays that suggest that close physical examination may have been an adjunct to the visual. The array of the larger birds includes a tawny frogmouth, a dollar bird, a nankeen night heron, several satin and regent bowerbirds, kingfishers, herons, lorikeets and parrots, and a rare white pygmy goose making a migratory pilgrimage to New South Wales. The large number of bird specimens, eighty in total combining small and larger birds, suggests the volume and scale of collecting in the early nineteenth century. The breadth of species and the diversity of their habitats also points to the inclusion of local Indigenous knowledge and involvement of local Aboriginal people, probably both Awabakal and Worimi people, in locating and collecting the specimens. A panoply of avian species is the subject of Jan van Kessel's seventeenth-century painting, The Bird Tree, held in Robien's cabinet. In this intimately scaled oil painting made on copper, van Kessel imagines a cornucopia of avian wonders settling to roost in a single tree.

Where the majority of the contents of the chest can be definitively located to New South Wales, the contents of the bottom drawer provide the exception to the rule and suggest a more peripatetic collecting principle and approach. It is in the bottom drawer of the chest that the most direct visual links to European Wunderkammern culture can be made. The contents of the drawer include diverse naturalia, artificialia, and exotica trawled from across the southern hemisphere with the extant contents of the bottom drawer including half the hoof of an unidentified animal, a flying fish,

FIGS.64 to 67 Details from insect, shell, bird, and miscellaneous drawers in the Macquarie Chest, Mitchell Collection, State Library of NSW, Sydney.





FIG.68 Jan van Kessel (1626–1679), *Tree of Birds*, ca. 1670; oil on copper, 17 x 22 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.59).

a Port Jackson shark egg (known colloquially as a mermaid's purse), two vegetable caterpillars, a string bag from Far North Queensland or Papua New Guinea, the skin of half a salmon, jaws of salmon, three sets of Toucan bills, the tip or rattle of a rattlesnake, part of a fish jaw (probably a sting ray), Brazilian seeds, unidentified hair or fur, a micrographic recording of the Lord's Prayer dated 1796, a carved wooden case, fabrics, tortoise shell plates and spoons adorned with pearl shell and red coral from the Solomon Islands, and a red coral necklace. Many of the items in the bottom drawer are hybrid or metamorphic objects, redolent with the chimerical qualities highly prized in the Renaissance. Within the Robien cabinet the jaws of a shark and the rostrum of a saw-fish are among the many *naturalia* (FIGS.69, 70).

An intimate souvenir of the Macquaries' time in the antipodes, the Macquarie Collectors' Chest, and the cabinet of Christophe-Paul de Robien, with its thousands of objects, both signal a re-awakening and re-definition of curiosity when experienced





today. Through the contemporary encounter where the beholder is positioned at the centre of the experience, a dialogical space is created.

For French curator Jean-Hubert Martin, whose work has for decades borrowed from the display tactics of the *Wunderkammer*, the activation of the agency and subjectivity of the beholder – speaking one to one – counteracts what he describes as the effects of 'the docile museum'. As he states:

Over the last century, art history has sought to classify artworks and has therefore striven to create categories. This positivist taxonomy has produced historical and geographical categories to which are added technique, authorship and function. Most museums have adopted this approach to give a scientific underpinning to their activities and thus escape the fluctuating tastes of collectors and their 'subjectivity'. These are the docile museums.?

Curiosity offers a cure-all for the docile museum.

**FIG.70** Rostrum of a pristidae (sawfish), subtropical and tropical Atlantic Ocean;  $14 \times 90 \times 2.5$  cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794 1 888)

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Ellis, Rare and Curious; The Secret History of Governor Macquarie's Collectors' Chest (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2010) provides the most thorough history of the object, with much of her information drawn from Anne McCormick's The Strathallan Cabinet (Sydney: Hordern House, 1991), commissioned by the Chests' private owner Ruth Simon.

FIG.69 Shark jaws, subtropical and tropical Atlantic Ocean; 11 x 24 x 25 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (D. 2012.2.1), endowment from the Muséum d'histoire naturelle de l'Université Rennes I (C3b/1).

<sup>8</sup> Martin, 2012.

**<sup>9</sup>** Ibid., pp. 14-15.



# SHORT FOREWORD TO THE CATALOGUE

FIG.71 Jean Jansson, Novus Atlas sive Theatrum orbis terranum in quo Hispaniae, Italiae, Asiae, Africae necnon Americae, tabulae & descriptiones luculentissima, vol. III, detail from Cyprus Insula; burin watercolour, 37.9 x 50.1 cm (unframed), Amsterdam, 1647; former collection of the Bibliothèque Saint Michel d'Anvers, 1650; Robien's former library (no. 1650 from the 1749 inventory); Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc (Rés G71³).

The text in this catalogue by François Bergot was completed in February 2016. However, it was more difficult to find authors for those that accompany it. Indeed, the section devoted to non-European objects in Robien's cabinet is problematic on more than one level, not only due to the large number of hapax legomena present in the collection, but also due to the nature of certain objects profoundly marked by the melding of various cultures. The consequence is simple: although it has been extremely difficult finding specialists for some of the more unusual objects, this difficulty was heightened for pieces located at the intersection of several categories. It is entirely understandable; the analytical approach leading to classification and hierarchisation has social advantages for researchers, as it allows them to develop a speciality through the clear identification of one's subject and the elements comprising it. However, transitional objects - which furthermore may be cross-cultural - are less easy to categorise, and as a result, are not the object of specific studies that increase their worth. There are other reasons, but I shall stop here at this quite essential, personal obstacle. Let us nevertheless highlight the research carried out by Sabine du Crest and her team (University of Bordeaux Montaigne) on exogenesis, which will, I hope, through the establishment of a corpus of objects situated partway between several worlds and accompanied by their studies, eventually provide us with reliable avenues for understanding in the future. I would like to add a short statement here relating to this focus on objects, concerning the level of organisation in which I have situated myself: by observing these pieces, which are highly polysemous because authentically made by indigenous artisans, but with new meanings following contact with the West, or from Western knowledge, forms, or iconographies, I deem it necessary to question the idea of influence. Indeed, this notion routinely reveals the point of view of Western expansionist penetration, but never of the 'host' society that assimilates (because it is quite capable of doing so),

reappropriates, or redirects those influences. Whether this concerns an Indian wash drawing or a Mi'kmaq screen, the means of 'Western influence' must also be perceived horizontally and not just vertically, as the manifestation of the host culture's understanding of artistic elements used and of its ability to employ them through mature savoir-faire.

All of these heuristic issues mean many happy hours for researchers and those of a curious bent, fascinated by changes in points of view.

# JSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE RENNES • JANVIER 2021

# AFRICA IN ROBIEN'S DAY



FIG.72 Jean Jansson, Novus Atlas sive Theatrum orbis terranum in quo Hispaniae, Italiae, Asiae, Africae nec-non Americae, tabulae & descriptiones luculentissima, vol. III, detail of Africae, Amsterdam, 1647; burin and watercolour etching, 37.7 x 49.9 cm; former collection of the Bibliothèque Saint Michel d'Anvers, 1650; Robien's former library (no. 1650 from the 1749 inventory); Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc (Rés G71³).

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MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD 179

Couched among sweeping, pejorative remarks about Africans and their material culture, Robien's 1740 manuscript scantly mentions African objects and makes only indirect references to objects – sculptures, a plaited fibre hat, and plant-fibre cloths – which are not present today in the collection. Robien wrote:

Pour les affricains, excepté leurs fétiches qui sont pour la plupart le premier objet qu'ils rencontrent, nous savons peu de leurs divinités; les ouvrages de leurs mains ne sont guère plus nombreux ni plus dignes de notre attention. Leur paresse ne leur permet pas de deployer leur industri, si ce n'est pour quelques chapeaux de jonc natté, ou quelques pagnes d'eptes ou d'herbes; encore sont-ce les femmes qui s'en donnent la peine, tandis que le mary fume ou se repose, ou bien est occupé à enlever quelqu'uns de ses voisins pour l'echanger avec les Européens contre quelques ustencilles, ou de l'eau de vie don't ils font grand cas...¹

Robien's statement begins with a contradiction – a begrudging acknowledgement that the sculptures, the 'fétiches,' are exceptions to his overarching statement that nothing else made by Africans merits attention. Robien's paradoxical statement corresponds with the ambiguous attitudes in French society at the time towards Africans and

their descendants. France's participation in the Transatlantic Slave Trade had escalated by the mid seventeenth century, and the Code Noir of 1685 defined the control and trade of Africans and their descendants in the French colonies in the Caribbean. However, in France many black individuals were embraced by and circulated freely among elite and royal circles.<sup>2</sup>

While Portuguese explorers first navigated Africa's Atlantic Coast and established early trading relationships with those communities during the late fifteenth century, the availability of African objects to European collectors such as Robien was made possible through developments in the Transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans beginning in the early sixteenth century. Just as African people were made transactional and displaced outside of Africa, so were African objects. Robien's pejorative attitude toward both African people and African artifacts demonstrates a conflation that objectified anything or anyone African, and thus perpetuated the trade and colonial endeavours. The adverse impact of this dismissive attitude on collections like Robien's is the dearth of documentation for and fragmentary nature of the African objects. For unlike people, objects can only attest to their social histories or 'social lives' to the extent their



**<sup>2</sup>** GOODWIN, 2009





materiality conveys it. More specific geographic and cultural attributions, dating, or information about provenance are lacking, and certain objects appear to be missing altogether. Possessing little to no documentation about the origins or trajectory of these objects to Robien's hands, one can only hypothesise here.

Today, eight objects attributed as African are included in the Robien Collection. These are an ivory side-blown horn from the Cross-River region of Nigeria (1794.1.779), an ivory divination tapper from Benin (1794.1.780), three leather quivers from west or north Africa (1794.1.774, 1794.1.775, 1794.1.776, two terracotta jars of uncertain origin (1794.1.770, 1794.1.771 FIG.74), a horn spoon of uncertain origin, and a ceramic pipe fragment from the Cameroon Grassfields (1794.1.794). The pipe's attribution was recently modified from ancient American to African.4

#### THE 'MISSING' OBJECTS

Based on Robien's comments above and the 1801 inventory of the Robien Collection, the Musée des beaux arts de Rennes preserves unnumbered catalogue records documenting the former presence of two sculptures (called 'fétiches' by Robien) and a plant fibre hat among the cabinet's African holdings. The museum also maintains an unnumbered record for 'pagnes', presumably based upon Robien's mention of 'quelques pagnes d'eptes ou d'herbes' in his 1740 writings. It is assumed these objects were lost or destroyed during the Revolution. It is tempting to imagine the chapeau and pagnes might have been similar to Kongo hats and cloths in roughly contemporaneous collections with which Robien might have been familiar, such as the Christoph Weickmann (1617-1681) Collection of Ulm.5 However, the lack of documentation makes it impossible to further define these objects' forms or origins.

It is similarly difficult to ascribe any specific characteristics or geographical origins to the two sculptures included in the inventory. 'Fétiche' is a problematic term that tells us more about Robien's longstanding misunderstandings about African material culture and spiritual practice than it reveals

**FIG.73** Bowl of a pipe, Cameroon, Grassfield, 17th century; black terracotta decorated by manual stamping of geometric designs, 5 x 5 x 1.2 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.794).

**FIG.74** Vessel known as 'Derived from Ouidah', Gulf of Guinea, 17th century; painted terracotta,  $7 \times 6.7$  cm; the Robien Collection, the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.770).

<sup>3</sup> APPADURAI, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> François Coulon, personal communication, 2018.

**<sup>5</sup>** JONES, 1994

<sup>6</sup> SILVA, 2017

about any particular object's cultural context. Fifteenth-century Portuguese explorers applied feitiço, their term for medieval charms, amulets, and magic, to the religious objects they encountered among African communities along the coasts.6 Negative connotations took hold with the 1705 writings of Dutch merchant Willem Bosman, which claimed that Africans were fixated on 'fetish objects' and thus incapable of higher conceptions of spirituality.7 Indeed, De Robien seems to suggest, above, that the sculptures represent some aspect of the gods, or divinités, of Africans. 'Fétiche' is often interpreted as referring to objects understood today as 'power objects', sculptures that are implements of ritual specialists and which derive their powers for healing, protection, and judgment from accumulations of organic and manmade materials considered to possess spiritual potency (FIG.76). However, Europeans applied this term broadly to many types of African sculpture, whether or not the objects actually served in this way among their communities of origin.

### PRESENT INVENTORY Uncertain Origins

Many of the African objects present in the De Robien collection today lack documentation and sufficient stylistic information, therefore limiting the ability to ascribe specific geographical origins. The terracotta pots (1794.1.770, 1794.1.771 FIG.74) and horn spoon (1794.1.778) are especially challenging. The group of quivers (1794.1.774 FIG.75, 1794.1.775, 1794.1.776), are somewhat exceptional based on style and materials. Although the Senegal River valley has been proposed for the quivers, it may be more cautious to assign the Sahel or western Sahel as a broader attribution.<sup>8</sup>

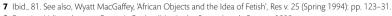
#### Ivories

The ivory side-blown horn (1794.1.779 FIG.77) and divination tapper (1794.1.780 FIG.78) are perhaps the most concrete testaments to the role of Tran-

satlantic trade in their creation, journey to France, and appeal to Robien. That the oliphant and tapper lack evidence of use and handling suggests they were made for the express purpose of sale or trade. The trades in ivory and slaves were codependent ventures. Caravans searching farther into the African interior for ivory also found more populations of Africans to enslave. Enslaved Africans, commodities themselves, served as beasts of burden carrying trade goods, including ivory tusks, and supplies for transport to and from the coast.

Robien's acquisition of these ivories, which must have occurred sometime after the 1740 catalogue was written, attest to the escalating demand, through the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, for ivory that ultimately led to the demise of elephant populations in coastal Africa by the nineteenth century. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, elephants and their ivory abounded near coastal west and central Africa and the substance was relatively inexpensive with indigenous local controls on ivory supply. 10 In Benin, for example, the king (oba) regulated the ivory supply by requiring one tusk from each elephant hunters felled with the option of purchasing the second. The ivory carving guild received ivory from these hunters to create royal objects and, by oba's permission only, objects for foreigners. 11 However, with trade and demand escalating through the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, by the mid-nineteenth century, coastal supplies of ivory had been depleted, requiring ivory seekers to hunt further into the interior.

Robien must have been aware of the so-called Afro-Portuguese ivories that entered Renaissanceera cabinets of curiosity and *wunderkammern*, and so likely desired examples of African ivories as a pinnacle for his own collection of African objects. Both the oliphant and tapper preserve the essential curved and attenuated form of an elephant's tusk. Representing "Africa" within De Robien's collection,



<sup>8</sup> Francine Ndiaye, letter to François Coulon/Musée des Beaux Arts de Rennes, 1998.

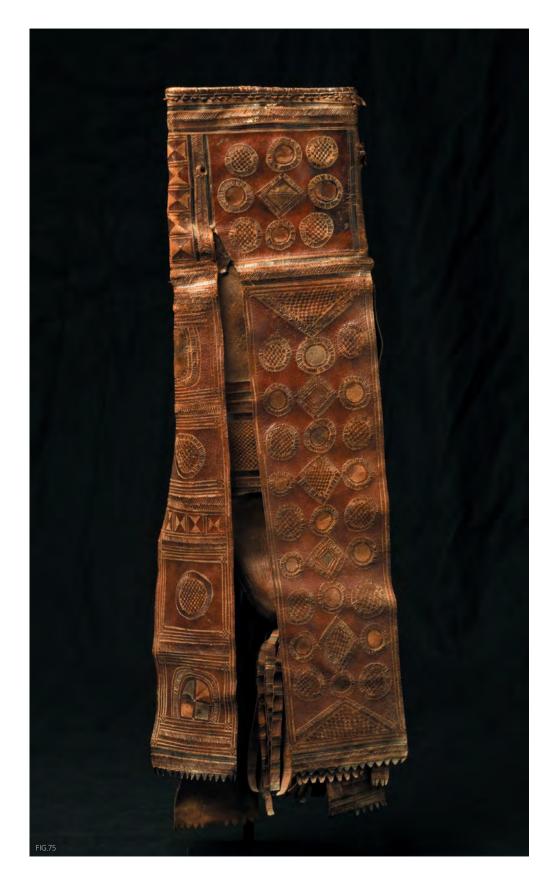


FIG.75 Quiver, Senegal (?), first half of the 18th century; leather dyed red and black and scarified, 60 x 14 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.774).

<sup>9</sup> MARTIN, 1972, p. 29. or larger discussions on the interconnectedness between the trades in slaves and ivory in context of Transatlantic trade, see Robert Harms, *River of Wealth, River of Sorrow* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) and Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988)

**<sup>10</sup>** BASSANI, 1988, p. 24.

**<sup>11</sup>** Ibid., p. 154.

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**FIG.76** Bakongo Statue known as 'N'Kisi Fetish', Congo, early 20th century; wood, textiles, and metals, 60.5 x 23.5 x 18.5 cm; Guillon purchase, 1934, Musée des beauxarts de Rennes (1934.16.18).

these items functioned as a signifier of Africa's associated meanings. The ivory tusk is literally the 'stuff' of Africa, making the imagined Africa more tangible to the eighteenth-century viewer. Such notions as the grandeur of the African elephant, the adventure of elephant hunting, and the violence required to hunt elephants for ivory are communicated. That Robien could literally own a piece of Africa in these tusks, in the form of a side-blown horn and tapper, further reinforced the idea of European possession of and superiority to Africa.

The presence of African objects in DRobien's and other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cabinets of curiosity in Europe was facilitated by the rise in Transatlantic trade. Just as African people who were forcibly transported to the Western hemisphere were displaced from their homes and histories, so did these African 'objects of curiosity' lose their geographical and cultural identities and histories upon leaving Africa and arriving in Europe and in collections like Robien's. The fragments of style and material must stand in for inferring these objects' identities and social lives.



#### OLIFANT (Ibibio: obukpong1) FIG.77

#### Restoration

Christian Binet, 2005

#### **Observations**

Nichole Bridges, Saint Louis Art Museum, 2016; Ezio Bassani, Università Internazionale dell'Arte, Florence, 1998 (West African, late 16th century–1650); Joël Dugot and Philippe Bruguières, Cité de la Musique, Paris, 1997 (Benin? before the 18th century); Frédéric De La Granville, musicologist, Université de Reims, 1995 (B-flat note; reddened with padouk powder).

#### **Bibliography**

FALAISE, 2020, p. 27; BASSANI, 2008, p. 41, no. 28; COULON, 2006, p. 73; BASSANI, 2000, p. 85, no. 310; CARPENTIER, 1998, T. I, pp. 162–167, T. II, pp. 111–114 and 196–203; BÖHM, 1998, Annexes I, p. 27; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 146, no. 8940 (Slave Coast); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 465, no. 4941; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 478, no. 1709 (Slave Coast); ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 299–300, no. 943.

#### **Exhibitions**

Ivoires d'Afrique dans les anciennes collections françaises, Paris, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques-Chirac, 19.02.08–11.05.08; Collecteurs d'âmes. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collections in Breton Museums, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 06.12.06–03.03.07; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72–08.72 (no catalogue).

No marks or inscriptions.

Distinctive relief-carved motifs associate this side-blown ivory horn with a corpus of at least nineteen comparable examples in European collections previously identified as originating from the Cross-River area of southeastern Nigeria. Unique to this region, the signs of *nsibidi* appear to be the source of the elements – a lizard, bands of chevrons and cross-hatching, an intersected arc, and a concentric quatrefoil – which decorate the Robien side-blown horn. *Nsibidi* is a secret system of graphic communication evident on a range of artistic genres from the region, including textiles, masks and costumes, sculpture in wood, metal, and stone, engraving on calabashes, and body tattoos,

which have been produced by such cultures as Ibibio, Igbo, Ejagham, and Efik in this region.<sup>3</sup> In addition, *nsibidi* can be communicated through gestures or by drawing in the ground.<sup>4</sup>

As there is not specific mention of this sideblown horn in Robien's own records to inform its date of entry into his collection, it is useful to consider the date range attributed to the corpus. Ezio Bassani has proposed that the group of similar Cross-River aerophones was produced by a single workshop between the end of the sixteenth century to mid- seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> This estimation is based on the earliest known dates of documentation for examples recorded in British, German, and Italian collections. An example in the British Museum (inv. SLMisc.2021), begueathed to the museum by Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), was unusually retrofitted with silver parts to create a drinking vessel; one of these silver emb ellishments features an inscription that includes the date 1599. Supporting the mid- seventeenth century terminus ad quem for the corpus are an example in Vienna at the Ambras Castle Kunsthammer (inv. 273). inventoried in 1659, and another illustrated as a watercolour sketch before 1664 in the inventory of the Settala collection in Milan.6

Side-blown horns made of ivory, in addition to elephant ivory itself and other prestige items made from the material, were exclusive to African elites. Among those societies accessible to European travellers since the late fifteenth century, African leaders offered ivories as diplomatic gifts and trade items to foreigners. Perhaps the most celebrated examples are the so-called 'Afro-Portuguese' ivories of Sapi and Kongo origins from west and central Africa, respectively.7 In the Niger Delta area, the Portuguese arrived around 1470, with the trade in enslaved Africans emerging through the sixteenth century and then escalating through the seventeenth.8 Apart from a reddish surface suggesting the application of palm oil, the de Robien example and others in the corpus do not appear to demonstrate wear from use as a musical instrument. Therefore, it is likely that the de Robien side-blown horn and the others in this corpus were made for the purpose of export, whether as diplomatic gifts or trade items.

European traders recognized the symbolic value of elephant tusks and ivory trumpets for African leaders. During the seventeenth to nineteenth

FIG.77 Olifant, Nigeria, Cross River region, ca. 1599–1680; ivory dyed with palm oil, 49 x 6.1 x 5.5 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.779).

centuries, Italian or Spanish makers translated that form into glass trumpets or vessels for trade to Africa. This created a desirable prestige gift, along with other items of European manufacture, to ingratiate and compensate African chiefs and merchants for access to and supplies of human captives, ivory, and palm oil.

- **1** JEFFREYS, 1968.
- **2** BASSANI, 2008, 2000, 1977.
- **3** CARLSON, 2007; SLOGAR, 2007.
- **4** CARLSON, 2007, p. 146.
- 5 BASSANI, 2000, p. 266.
- 6 BASSANI, 2000, 2008.
- 8 ISICHEI, 1973, pp. 44-46.



#### **DIVINATION BELL AND TAPPER (Fon: lonfli)** FIG.78

#### Restoration

Christian Binet, 2005

#### **Observations**

Nichole Bridges, Saint Louis Art Museum, 2016; Ezio Bassani, Università Internazionale dell'Arte, Florence, 1998 (West African, 17th century): Joël Dugot and Philippe Bruguières, Cité de la Musique, Paris, 1997 (Benin? before the 18th century); Frédéric De La Granville, musicologist, Université de Reims, 1995 (West Africa).

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BASSANI, 2008, p. 41, no. 31; COULON, 2006, p. 23; COULON, 2001, p. 44; BASSANI, 2000, p. 85, no. 311; CARPENTIER, 1998, pp. 153, 155, 160; BÖHM, 1998, Annexes I, p. 28; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 146, no. 8940 (Slave Coast); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 465, no. 4942; ANDRÉ, 1876, pp. 478-79, no. 1710 (Slave Coast); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 300, no. 944; drawing in RÉPIN, 1863, p. 92.

#### **Exhibitions**

Ivoires d'Afrique dans les anciennes collections françaises, Paris, Musée du quai Branly - Jacques-Chirac, 19.02.08-11.05.08; Collecteurs d'âmes. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collections in Breton Museums, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts. 06.12.06-03.03.07: Robien. l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

No marks or inscriptions.

The most essential implements of a Fon or Yoruba diviner are the tapper and tray. To initiate a divination session, the Fon bokonon (diviner) strikes the point of the tapper several times against the wood tray. The Robien example is also a bell; its clapper would have enhanced the percussive function of the tapper. The sounds produced invite the spirits to receive the sacrifice offered upon the sacred palm nuts. The diviner repeatedly casts the blessed palm nuts onto the tray, with each landing indicating the number of markings the diviner must make into wood shavings that cover the surface of the board. These markings, in turn, inform the bokonon which of the oral texts of Fa

to draw upon during a particular consultation.<sup>2</sup> Fa was introduced to the region by Yoruba diviners during the 1708-1740 reign of the Dahomey King Agaja.3 However, by this time there were likely more ancient forms of divination already being practiced by Fon peoples.4

The De Robien ivory tapper is simply decorated. It features bands of incised designs, blackened for contrast, in linear, cross-hatched, and herringbone patterns across the length of the tapper. Near the centre, parallel to the incised designs, is a curved band in relief that serves to divide the tapper into the three spatial segments - the bell or handle, a central design element (sometimes figural), and the extended point.

The most precious divination tappers are made of ivory, rather than wood or bone. Among the corpus of tappers identified as Fon in major collections, ivory examples are rare. Several Fon divination tappers are in the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac. Most are made of wood and are minimally decorated with simple incised designs or relief bands. Exceptions include two sculpturally developed examples featuring central kneeling female figures, one made of ivory (MQB 71.1936.21.3) and the other made of wood. The latter features an openwork bell atop the figure's head and, although made of wood, was carved in a curved form to imitate ivory from

Like the Cross-River oliphant (1794.1.780), the De Robien tapper does not demonstrate wear from use. Adze markings across the bare sections of ivory appear quite fresh, and have not been smoothed by handling over time. Therefore, it is likely the tapper was made for the purpose of export, whether as a diplomatic gift or trade item. A Fon divination object may have been known and desirable to Robien as a result of the notoriety of the Christoph Weickmann cabinet of curiosities in Ulm, Germany. Several African objects are described in a second edition of Weickmann's collection catalogue published in 1659, including a wood, relief-carved divination board described as having been used by the King of Allada in Benin.<sup>5</sup> Along the central, circular border is the portrayal of three elephant tusks, carved with bands of linear and chevron designs, suggestive of divination tappers. With origins from Benin, perhaps this tapper was desirable to Robien for this visual allusion to the Weickmann trav.

FIG 78 Divination bell and tapper Benin civilisation founded early 18th century; ivory, pigment, 9.4 x 3.4 x 3.2 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée. des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.780).

- 1 JOUBERT, 2008, p. 218.
- **2** PEMBERTON, 2000, p. 16-17.
- **3** JOUBERT, 2008, p. 216.
- 4 PRESTON BLIER, 1995, p. 105.
- **5** JONES, 1994; LAGAMMA, 2000, p. 36-38.



# AMERICA IN ROBIEN'S DAY

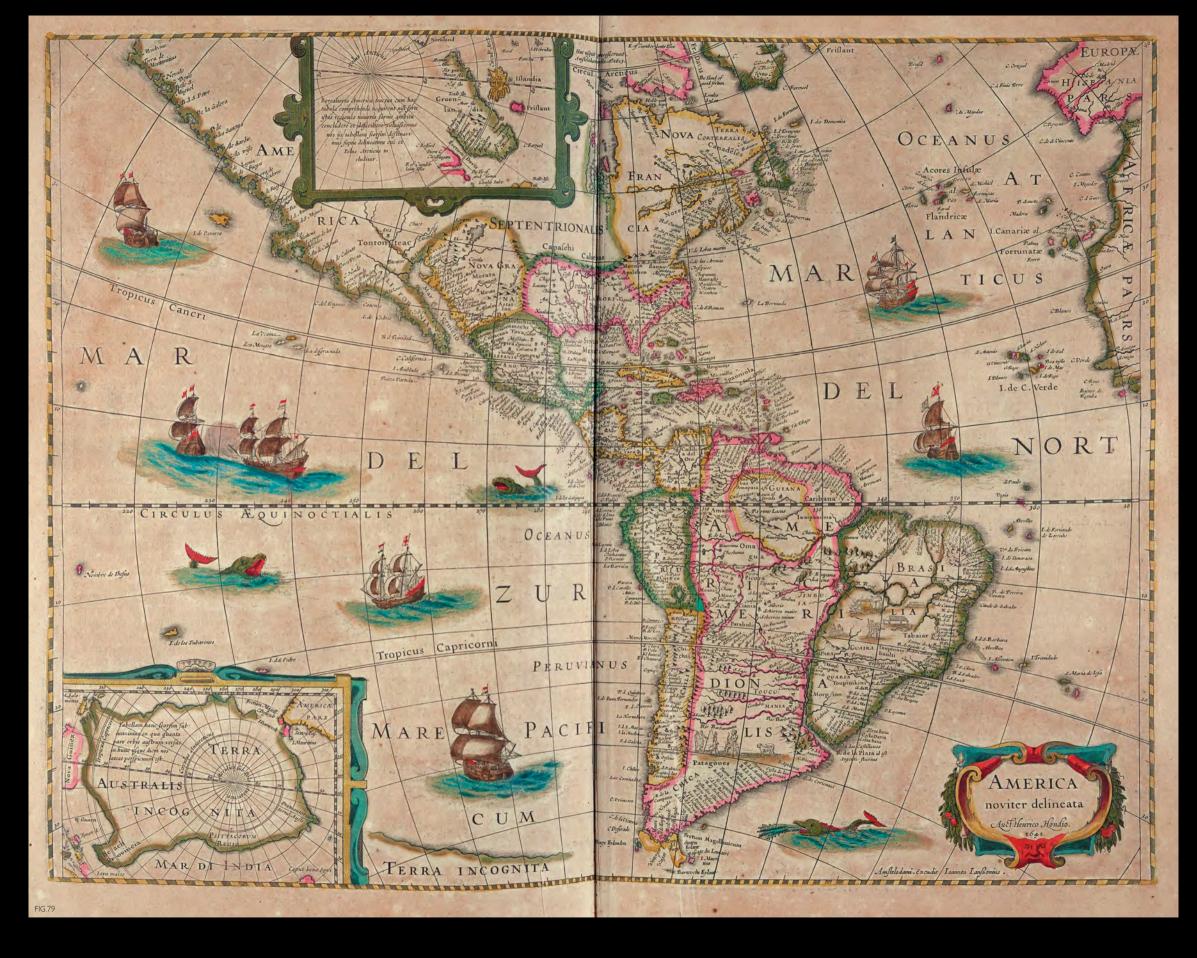


FIG.79 Jean Jansson, Novus Atlas sive Theatrum orbis terranum in quo Hispaniae, Italiae, Asiae, Africae nec-non Americae, tabulae & descriptiones luculentissima, vol. III, detail of America, Amsterdam, 1647; burin and watercolour etching, 37.5 x 49.8 cm; former collection of the Bibliothèque Saint Michel d'Anvers, 1650; Robien's former library (no. 1650 from the 1749 inventory); Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc (Rés G71³).

#### **PIPE CHAMBER FIG.80**

#### Restauration

Never restored; has been used

#### Observations

Geneviève Treyvaud, archaeologist, Grand Conseil de la Nation Waban-Aki, Université Laval, Quebec (Northeastern United States); Ruslan Yendrzhiyevskyv. independent researcher. Lviv. 2016 (French colonists? from Alabama to the Mississippi); Antoine Tzapoff, artist, Paris, 2006 (Creek Nation); Emmanuel Désveaux, Musée du quai Branly -Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2003 (Mississippi region); Christian Feest, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, 1998 (Mississippi region).

#### **Bibliography**

BANÉAT, 1932, p. 150, no. 9174 (Peru); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 477, no. 5133 (Peru); ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 483, no. 1735 (Peru); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 304, no. 961 (Peru).

#### **Exhibitions**

Collectors of Souls. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collections in Breton Museums. Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 06.12.06-03.03.07; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

#### **CALUMET PIPE SHAFT FIG.83**

#### Restoration

Alain Renard, 2005; Atelier régional de restauration de Kerguéhennec, Bignan, 2010

#### Observations

Geneviève Treyvaud, archaeologist, Grand Conseil de la Nation Waban-Aki, Université Laval, Quebec (Ojibwa? goes with no. 795?); Ruslan Yendrzhiyevskyy, independent researcher, Lviv, 2016 (from Alabama to the Mississippi); Denis Buffenoir, Musée des Confluences, Lyon, 2006 (Mi'kmaq, goes with no. 795); Antoine Tzapoff, artist, Paris, 2006 (Mi'kmaq); Emmanuel Désveaux, Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2003 (Mi'kmag); Christian Feest, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, 1998 (Mi'kmag).

#### **Bibliography**

BANÉAT, 1932, p. 150, no. 9180 (Peru); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 477, no. 5139 (Peru); ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 484, no. 1740 (Peru); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 304, no. 966 (Peru).

#### **Exhibition**

Collectors of Souls. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collections in Breton Museums, Rennes. Musée des beaux-arts. 06.12.06-

#### TWO MODELS OF CANOES FIGS.84 and 85

#### Restoration

Alain Renard, 2005

#### Observations

Geneviève Treyvaud, archaeologist, Grand Conseil de la Nation Waban-Aki, Université Laval, Quebec (Mi'kmag); Ruslan Yendrzhiyevskyy, independent researcher, Lviv, 2016 (Mi'kmag); Emmanuel Désveaux, Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2003 (Mi'kmag); Christian Feest, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, 1998 (Mi'kmag); Marie-Paule Robitaille, Musée de la civilisation, Quebec, 1997 (Mi'kmag or Beothuk); Céline Saucier, Direction Générale du patrimoine, Section archéologie et ethnologie, Quebec, 1976 (Mi'kmag).

BESSON, 1978, p. 298; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 148, no. 9043-44 (Labrador); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 470, no. 5024-25 (Labrador); ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 480, no. 1719-20 (North America); ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 300-301, no. 949 bis (North America).

Collectors of Souls. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collections in Breton Museums, Rennes. Musée des beaux-arts. 06.12.06-03.03.07; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

FIG.80 Bowl of a pipe, United States, early 18th century; catlinite, 6.3 x 18.8 x 2.7 cm; the Robien Collection. Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794 1 795)

FIG.81 Bowl of a pipe, North America (?), first half of the 18th century; beige wheel-engraved terracotta, 42 x 5 2 x 3 2 cm; the Robien Collection. Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.798).

FIG.82 Bowl of a pipe, Louisiana or French Guiana (?), first half of the 18th century; beige terracotta painted in negative, 6.8 x 3.5 x 2.5 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794 1 797)

FIG.83 Pipe shaft, United States, early 18th century; shaft made of grooved wood dyed red, covered in rolled yellow, red, and black animal fibres holding feathers, tufts of hair, and pieces of leather, 94 x 2 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.800).

#### FAN FIG.86

#### Restoration

Claire Faye, 1997

#### **Observations**

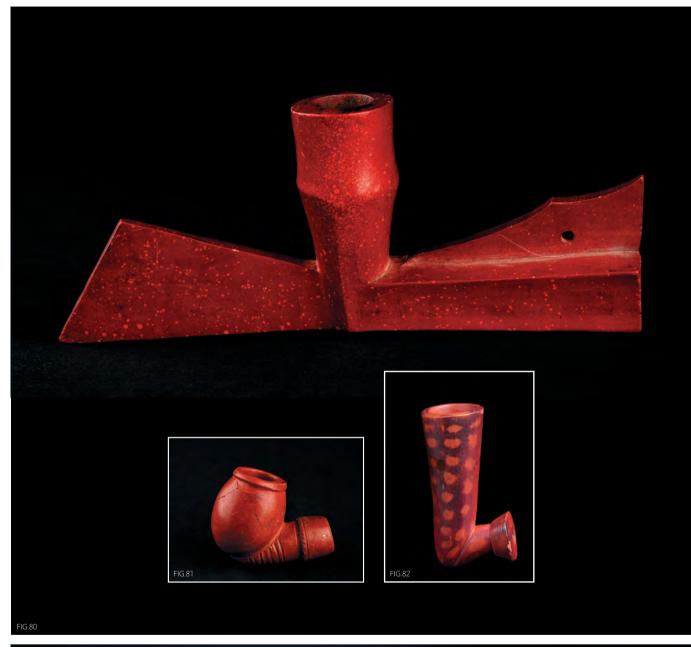
Geneviève Treyvaud, archaeologist, Grand Conseil de la Nation Waban-Aki, Université Laval, Quebec (Mi'kmaq); Pierre-Henri Biger, PhD in art history, specialising in fans, Rennes, 2016 (ca. 1740?); Nathalie Rizzoni, CELLF Université Paris-Sorbonne, Paris, 2013 (ca. 1750?); Emmanuel Désveaux, Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2003 (Mi'kmaq); Christian Feest, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, 1998 (Mi'kmaq); Marie-Paule Robitaille, Musée de la civilisation, Quebec, 1997 (Mi'kmaq); Céline Saucier, Direction Générale du patrimoine, Section archéologie et ethnologie, Quebec, 1976 (Mi'kmag).

#### **Bibliography**

BIGER, 2016; COULON, 2006, p. 22; BESSON, 1978, p. 296; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 148, no. 9054 (Canada); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 470, no. 5027 (Canada).

#### **Exhibitions**

Collectors of Souls. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collections in Breton Museums, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 06.12.06-03.03.07; Québec des premières Nations, Musée de Bretagne, Rennes, 16.09.97-15.01.98.





This collection of North American material is unique in its scope. It does not seem to have been obtained all at the same time, nor from the same place. Of particular interest are the red stone pipes. The range of dates for these pipes seems to span at least a century. The earliest form found in the collection is of the classic 'Calumet' of the colonial period (FIGS.81 and 83). This particular form of pipe emerges in the seventeenth century in the east and lasts through the 1770s. Other examples of this pipe-form can be found throughout the east from the northern Maritimes down into the southern nations like the Creek and Catawba.

The calumet form is unique and underwent significant variations over time. The example in the collection is that of the classic early type seen in the Jean-Baptiste Minet drawing. It has a long, tapered prow with a perpendicular bowl midbody, and a simple square or rounded basal end. Some have theorised that this calumet shape inspired the iron-pipe tomahawk that later emerges in the eighteenth century. The ridge that runs along the top of the basal end is pierced with a small hole for which a thong is meant to pass through, which connects the stone pipe to the long pipe stem. This cord-hole serves a practical purpose, it is to prevent the bowl from accidently dropping off the stem and breaking.

The 'calumet' as it has come to be known, is part of a complicated system of indigenous protocol which seems to have originated among the Midwestern Nations and then travelled eastward in the seventeenth century to eventually encompass all of eastern North America. The pipe is regarded as an emblem of peace and is closely associated with the peace-making process and a series of ritual dances called the 'calumet dance'. Tribal groups would carry the calumet in formal processions prior to a meeting and even present it when encountering other Native peoples as a sign that they were on a peaceful mission.<sup>1</sup>

The calumet dance required the use of a pipe whose stem was highly decorated with feathers, ribbons, bird scalps, and beads. Each nation would decorate their version of the calumet as they saw fit. It usually employed elements from the 'upper world' like eagle-feather fans that would hang below the stem like rays of the sun or it would use the scalps of the creatures that lived in all three worldly realms, like the duck or loon which flies in the upper world, dives into the lower, and floats and walks in-between like humans.

Because of its important role as a tool of protocol it is not surprising that one could be found in the hands of a colonial agent. They were requisite objects that facilitated friendship and veracity between peoples. Of course, over time, objects that had ethnographic value and use become *objets d'art* and were produced by Native artisans specifically for the market.

The other objects seem to be from the souvenir era of the nineteenth century. A birchbark fan is of particular note, depicting a scene from what is an icon of traditional indigenous life embroidered in dyed porcupine quills and some areas of dyed moose hair. The tradition of using porcupine quills and moose hair on birchbark is an ancient custom but the type of object produced and by whom it was produced changed over time. Ursuline nuns in Quebec learned these indigenous embroidery techniques in the seventeenth century and began to produce objects of "curiosity" using methods throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century.

**FIG.84** Model of a boat, Canada, early 18th century; stitched birchbark decorated with red and black vertical designs in relief, 8.2 x 97 x 16.2cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.782).

FIG.85 Model of a boat, Canada, early 18th century; stitched birchbark decorated with red and black vertical designs in relief, 6 x 51 x 8.5 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.783).

The age of the piece is hard to determine.<sup>2</sup> What appears to be seven clusters of glass beaded loops seem to be dyed and cut porcupine quills strung like beads. This detail lends itself to an earlier period of manufacture although is not 100 % definitive. Looking at the realistic rendering of the Native person, the bird, and the dog we see similarities with early figural work that appears in objects from the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. The way the handle and edge is wrapped in an organic bark or bast fibre with woven quills as a pattern leads me to conclude a manufacture prior to 1830. However, to be positive about whether or not it was made by Native hands or produced by an Ursuline nun as 'convent artfibre cannot be determined 3

Other objects that seem to fall into the souvenir category are the two birchbark canoe models. The first model (1794.1.782) is of interest because it has been attributed to a period during the French colonial occupation of North America, prior to 1740. Canoes and canoe models of this period are quite scarce. Owing to the shape of the surviving prow and the central peak in the gunnels, this model appears to be of Mi'kmaq origin. (FIG.84) Both canoes appear to have been restored. But with model 1794.1.782, there was a surviving prow end. Since all birchbark canoes have identical front and back prows, it is entirely responsible to simply restore the shape of the missing end to match.









**<sup>1</sup>** LE SUEUR, 1685.

**<sup>2</sup>** See article by Pierre-Henri Biger that dates it to around the 1740s: BIGER, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> A detailed analysis of this type of object, made by the Ursulines and indigenous people, can be found in PHILLIPS, 1998

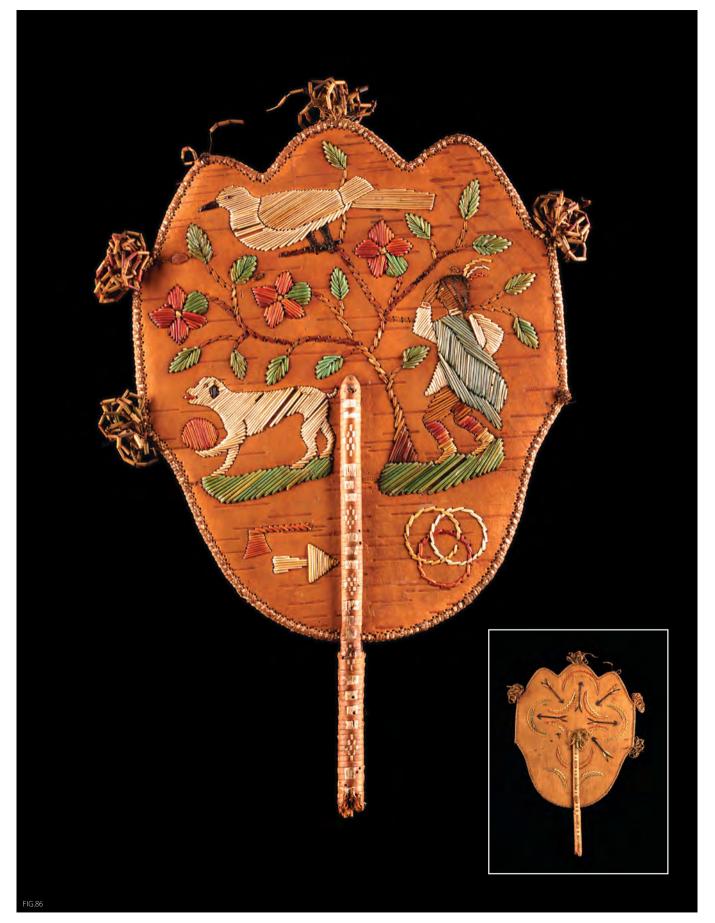
Birchbark canoes have been made by many Native peoples who had developed their own regional shapes and styles. Models such as this example were commonly sold as tourist art and often came with carved or wax dolls in full Native dress and a myriad of tools and accessories such as paddles, kegs, fishing spears, sails, and guns. A comparative example of a Mi'kmag canoe model dating to the early seventeenth century survives at the Pitt Rivers Museum as part of the Tradescant Collection. Due to the early catalogue entry, it is very possible that the two Mi'kmag canoe models from the Robien cabinet are convent-made souvenir art.

The painted designs on this example are very reflective of the protective nature of Native design. Red ochre (iron oxide) and later vermillion were spiritual pigments offering both beauty and protection to the vessel. Miniature models were often highly detailed in their construction and it is no mistake that this model has the painted details of a full size canoe.

The second model (1794.1.783 ) has undergone extensive restoration (FIG.85) at both ends. Since the original canoe did not have existing prows, we cannot know the specific shape or design of the canoe and, as such, we cannot speculate on its tribal origins. It is understandable that a conservation decision was made based on the other example that did have a surviving prow, but knowing the importance of the prow-shapes to the identification of the object, we are left with a totally speculative tribal attribution. The painting on this example is very simple and unrefined, a sign of a somewhat rushed construction or possibly an addition by the new owner.

This exceptional collection of early North American material is most important because it chronicles the beginnings of the trade in Native arts. There is a misconception among Native peoples that all the objects appearing in museums were ill-gotten. The legacy of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century salvage collection policies resonate throughout our history; it is a history of fraud, theft, and intimidation. However, initially the market in Native arts was an honest exchange. Native makers would produce objects of ethnographic interest usually for fair compensation. These objects reflect that original relationship, as well as the complicated Native/ Ursuline connection, which the convent in Montreal capitalised on. As Native people working in the museum field, it is our duty to educate and inform our own people as to the true history of these objects and, more importantly, ask what they mean for us today.

FIG.86 Fan, Canada, 18th century; double-stitched birchbark, cut out and mounted on wooden handle, decorated with embroidery of roots of conifers and dyed porcupine quills decorated with dyed porcupine beads at the seven corners, 36 x 24 x 1.3 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beauxarts de Rennes (794.1.898).



## AMERICAN CURIOSITIES

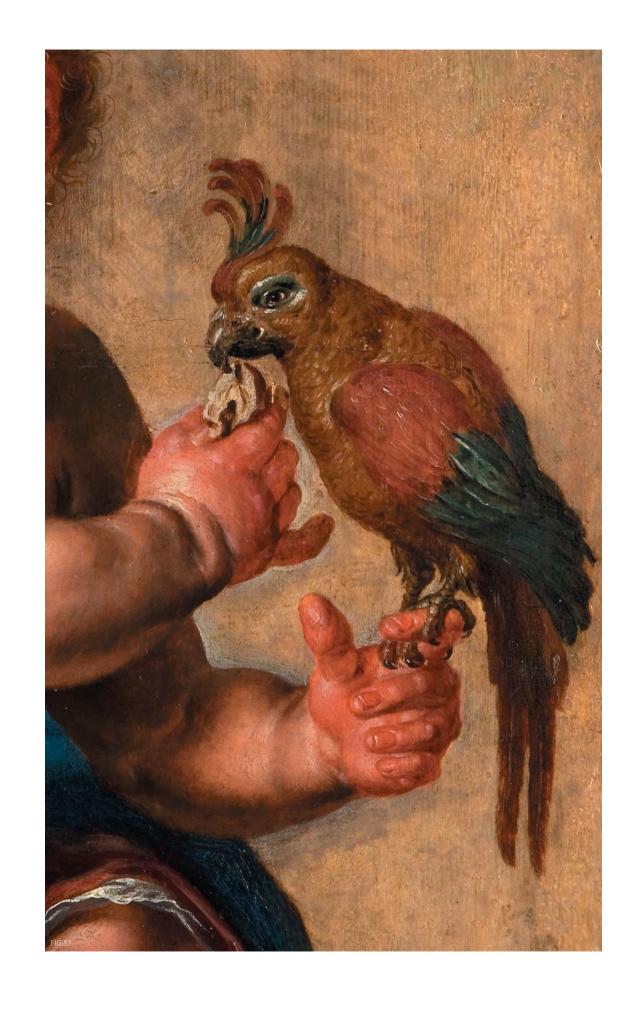
FIG.87 Maerten Jacobsz Van Heemskerck (1498–1574), Saint Luke Painting the Virgin, first half of 16th century; oil on wood, 207.5 x 144.2 cm; detail of the first American parrot painted in Europe (Ara macao, Linnaeus, 1758); painting at the Hôtel de Ville in Nuremberg until 1794; war plunder; sent from the state in 1801; Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (801.1.6).

From the very earliest voyages of exploration along the African and then American coastlines, conquerors, travellers, missionaries, and colonial civil servants brought back various items from those newly discovered lands: natural curiosities (naturalia), as well as objects produced by indigenous peoples (artificialia). Unknown plants, strange animals, and wonderful shells and minerals became the required ornaments for the cabinets of curiosities of princes and scholars, alongside objects made by the peoples encountered. This is the context within which the adjective 'exotic' emerged in the sixteenth century as a new word both in French and English, associated with the idea of far-off places. In the French language, it appeared for the first time in 1548 in a text by Rabelais (1494-1553), describing beautiful and rare goods displayed in a

The discovery of a 'new world', a world that had not previously existed in the minds of Europeans (who had thought that on the other side of the Great Western Ocean they would find the Far East), sparked their imaginations and provoked surprise, curiosity, and wonder. Even the question of whether the inhabitants of these West Indies had a soul was up for debate. The strange and fantastical animals encountered on the other side of the Atlantic, such as the toucan and the armadillo.

soon became part of the first collections of *exotica*; and objects produced by 'Indians' aroused admiration, at times for their weaponry and 'savagery', at others for the feather and basketwork objects, whose fabrication was completely unknown in the Old World. And let's not forget, at the time of the Spanish Conquest, the Aztec and Incan treasure that astonished Europe.

Acquired through trade, exchange, or looting, these objects categorically lost the context of their everyday realities as soon as they arrived on European soil, instead becoming curiosities. They were highly sought-after across Europe: inventories demonstrate that they were found in princely collections and more modest collections, by enthusiasts in Italy, England, the Netherlands, France, and Austria. The greatest Italian collector was unquestionably the House of Medici, who soon came to acquire many pre-Columbian objects as well as a vast collection of feather adornments, but exotic objects were also found in the famous collections of Ferdinando Cospi (1606-1686), in his Bologna cabinet, and that of Manfredo Settala (1600-1680) in Milan. Outside of Italy (FIG.88), we could mention the collections belonging to the Saxon princes in Dresden, the Hapsburgs in Vienna, Christian IV of Denmark in Copenhagen (1577-1648), or at the



<sup>1</sup> Among some of the innumerable publications about cabinets of curiosities, the following works are of interest: IMPEY, 1985; MONCOND'HUY, 2013; SCHNAPPER, 2012.



FIG.88 Olmec figurine, Mexico, first millenium BC; jade, 11 x 8 cm, in a niche measuring 36.8 x 36.8 x 23 cm by Guillaume de Graff (ca. 1720); former Wittelsbach Collection, prior to 1745 (not cited in the earlier inventory); treasure from the Castle of Munich (ResMü. SchK1258(WL)).

Ambras Castle, in which feather objects, clubs, or hammocks could be found.

France was not to be outdone either, and the earliest objects collected from the Americas became part of the 'cabinet of singularity of the king' in the late sixteenth century. André Thevet (1516-1590) was the oldest known 'guardian' of this royal collection; he held the position of cosmographer for four sovereigns, from Henri II (1519-1559) to Henri III (1551-1589). In 1626, at the initiative of Doctor Guy de la Brosse (1586-1641), Louis XIII (1601–1643) founded, in the future location of the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, the 'Garden of Medicinal Plants', followed in 1729 by the 'Cabinet of Natural History'. Other collections were built up by aristocrats, scholars, and intellectuals, and within abbeys, such as the Abbey of Saint Genevieve.2

The collected 'curiosities' reveal the geographical areas in which the colonial and commercial policies of France under the Ancien Régime ope-

rated in America: New France (Canada, the United States) on one hand, and Brazil, French Guiana, and the Antilles on the other.<sup>3</sup>

In North America, an immense territory more or less controlled by France stretched from the Saint-Laurent Valley to Louisiana. From Quebec to Labrador, the Great Lakes region, the Mississippi Valley, and the Great Plains came a huge number of objects (painted skins, moccasins, wampum pearl belts, headdresses, bags, weapons, calumets, etc.) mostly offered as diplomatic gifts during alliances pledged with indigenous people, or seized during conflicts.

The second area of French colonial expansion in the New World concerns South America and the Caribbean. French attempts to establish a colony in the bay of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, between 1555 and 1560, were part of a larger flow of trade and exchange between the French and American Indians on the coasts of Brazil, which continued until the early seventeenth century. Some rare

objects related to this history have survived until today, such as a mace and a Tupinamba feather cape now conserved at the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, or an exceptional 'ceremonial stick' conserved at the Saint Genevieve Library. Finally, the colonisation of French Guiana in the first half of the seventeenth century still continues today. From this Amazonian land have come many objects now preserved in French museums: clubs, bows, blowguns, feather adornments, bells, cachesexes, rattles, flutes, basketwork, gourds, hammocks, etc. Some objects of a similar nature were also collected from Caribbean Indians in the Lesser Antilles, when France was creating settlements in Martinique and Guadeloupe.

This early French colonial empire in the Americas was established from the kingdom's western provinces. Ports along France's Atlantic coast were the departure point for travellers, colonists, missionaries, and officers, who upon their return introduced American Indian objects collected during their stay. However, the vast majority of collectors never set foot in the colonies. In 1659, Dominican monk André Chevillard (1682 †) emphasised the role of sailors and merchants in the trade in curiosities between the Caribbean and France. Many collectors contacted those who were in the colonies, or who were heading there, or even tasked them with seeking out objects.

Collectors of curiosities who lived not far from port cities naturally held more of an advantage and were more easily able to procure objects coming from the Americas. Those who lived in the vicinity of the port town La Rochelle regularly went there to stock up on unique objects from far away: Paul Contant (1562–1629), an apothecary from Poitiers, owned a small boat known as a 'canoe', but also a maraca, belt, and necklace made with pieces of shell, garments and circlets made from feathers, weapons such as wooden clubs, and a necklace 'made from the teeth of enemies'. Samuel Veyrel, a seventeenth-century apothecary from Saintes, also boasted a beautiful collection of exotic artificialia: it included a Brazilian mattress, a mat made of rushes, a Brazilian feather coat, and a small pair

of American-Indian shoes. In the weapon category, he owned a bow with arrows, and he also had a necklace made from teeth taken from defeated enemies.

Other collectors took advantage of the posts they occupied within the Marine Ministry or in maritime cities in order to increase their collections. This was the case for Michel Bégon (1638-1710), intendant of the Marines at Rochefort and intendant of the Généralité in La Rochelle. A partial inventory of his collection, drawn up in 1699, and more especially his correspondence, gives us information about the natural and ethnographical curiosities that abounded in his cabinet. In 1695 in particular, he mentions delivery of a 'pirogue from the savages in Dominica'. The example of the Fayolle cabinet in Versailles reveals the complexity of the networks used in the search for curiosities. From the 1750s onwards, Jean-Denis Fayolle, principal clerk and commissioner of the Marine, took advantage of his own post, but also those of his three brothers and son, who were employed in the Marine, to constitute his significant collection of exotic objects. The inventory of this cabinet, drawn up in 1792, mentions more than two hundred American pieces, today mostly conserved at the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac.

The exotic collection assembled by Christophe-Paul de Robien (1698-1756) fits within this context. The pieces today conserved at the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes reveal the appetite of this historian, naturalist, and political figure for exotic curiosities from many parts of the world. 5 Several objects bear witness to ancient trade routes with Asia, like a horn cup and a green, glazed ceramic from China (FIG.148). Several objects come from Africa, like an ivory trunk from Nigeria (FIG.77), a quiver (perhaps Wolof) from Senegal (FIG.75), and an ivory bell from West Africa (FIG.78). However, like his neighbours from La Rochelle, Poitiers, and Saintes, the Marquis de Robien demonstrated a real interest in curiosities from the Americas. Twenty-two pieces, still preserved, give evidence of this and stem from the trade networks established with various French-held regions on the other side of

<sup>2</sup> DELPUECH, 2013 a.

**<sup>3</sup>** For a general overview of France in America, see HAVARD, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> DELPUECH, 2017, p. 39-55.

**<sup>5</sup>** COULON, 2001, 2006.





FIG.89 Double-chambered pipe bowl, United States, Great Plains, first half of the 18th century; sculpted catlinite, 3.6 x 7.8 x 1.3 cm; had been used and was drawn in Robien's manuscript Description historique de son cabinet, ca. 1740, pl. 1 (Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, Rennes, MS 0546); the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.796).

the Atlantic Ocean. New France is represented by a sort of fan in birchbark and dyed porcupine spikes from eastern Canada (see Michael Galban, Indigenous art, pp. 196-197), possibly from the Mi'kmag people. Two pipe bowls made of red pipestone (catlinite, FIG.86) come from the Great Plains of the American West, where French-Canadian trappers traded beaver fur and other commodities. An Iroquois club, which has since disappeared, was also mentioned. Some objects from South American lands were also present, such as a club engraved with geometric designs that is likely to have come from the Guiana coast, but could also originate from the Lesser Antilles. And finally, an Inuit canoe, from south Greenland or Baffin Island, is one of the cabinet's most iconic pieces.

All of these objects were collected from American Indian communities, but in the collection in Rennes, we can also find several pre-Columbian objects from the very first archaeological finds of the early eighteenth-century. At the time of the arrival of Christopher Columbus, a collection of ceramic pieces was brought back from the Taíno, an indigenous people from the Greater Antilles. With the Spanish Conquest, the Amerindians living on these islands were quickly and entirely wiped

out. There were no remaining survivors at the time the French took possession of the western end of the island of Hispaniola (today split between Haiti and the Dominican Republic). The archaeological pieces in Robien's collection undoubtedly come from the French colony of Saint-Domingue and were most probably found in a cave or during earth-moving activities.

A pre-Columbian vase from the Chimú culture of Peru, dating from circa 1000 to 1500, (FIG.90) as well as another Andean object, the statuette of a sort of wooden 'idol' covered with precious metals (silver, gold, electrum), a combination of a Moche mask from the early centuries of the Common Era with a possibly Incan base, and an américanerie made for the curiosity market, reveal the multitude of channels for acquisition (FIG.99). Similarly, there are two colonial-era painted terracotta vessels from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, which until recently were still attributed to the Guadalajara region in Mexico (see Andrés Gutiérrez Usillos, Beyond Tonalá, pp. 214-227) and therefore contemporary to the time of Robien's cabinet. Where did Robien procure these objects that came from Spanish colonies? In fact, during the Ancien Régime, collections were far from sta-



tic. Objects circulated among European scholars and institutions, to such a degree that their paths were often unknown to historians. There were even public sales, and cabinet auctions increased in the second half of the eighteenth century. Not to mention the fact that the Atlantic trade routes also enabled the transit of all sorts of items from all over the Americas.

One of the main issues posed by all these extra-European collections in the Ancien Régime lies in the fact that although the appetite for exoticism and curiosities was the driving force behind these collections, an interest in ethnology was generally absent. When classing the objects, the material of the object often outweighed any other considerations, and the precise geographical source of collected objects is only rarely mentioned. Many authors insisted on referring to objects as 'savage', 'Indian' or 'American', without any further detail. The history of these collections of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remains largely unknown, as the associated documents contain little information as to the content or arrangement of the cabinets. The follow-up and identification of collections is often uncertain, and many attributions found today were applied a posteriori, on the basis

of the typology of the pieces themselves, and sometimes in a haphazard way.

The French Revolution upset these practices and approaches. To the secularisation of clerical assets and the royal domain, as declared by the National Constituent Assembly in December 1789, was added the sequestration and later confiscation of assets belonging to émigrés and convicts (1791-1792). By creating the Commission des monuments des arts et des sciences (1790-1793), and later the Commission temporaire des arts (1793-1795), the Convention, through its Comité d'instruction publique, thus participated in the creation of an unprecedented policy for heritage and museum management. In Rennes, the collections belonging to Christophe-Paul de Robien were confiscated in 1794. Today, they bear remarkable witness to the practice of collectionism in eighteenth-century Europe, but also to American Indian people of that

FIG.90 Double-chambered whistling bottle. Peru. 15th century: black terracotta. 21 x 22 x 10.5 cm; sepulture object; drawn in Robien's manuscript Description historique de son cabinet, ca. 1740, pl. 11 (Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, Rennes, MS 0547): the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.482).

#### CLUB FIG.91

#### Restoration

Atelier Régional de Restauration de Kerguéhennec, Bignan, 2006

#### Observations

André Delpuech, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2011 (Caribbean); Daniel Lévine, Musée de l'Homme, Paris, 1998 (French Guiana, eighteenth century, Galibi or Wayama); Christian Feest, Goethe-Universität, Frankfort, 1998 (French Guiana, eighteenth century); Randall Dean, archaeologist, San Francisco, 1998 (Galibi, the Guianas or Caribbean of the Lesser Antilles).

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DELPUECH, 2015, p. 343; COULON, 2006, p. 56; COULON, 2001, p. 43; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 146, no. 8934 (Slave Coast); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 465, no. 4934; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 479, no. 1715 (Slave Coast); ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 300–301, no. 948 A.

#### **Exhibitions**

Collectors of Souls. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collection in Breton Museums, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 06.12.06–03.03.07; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72–08.72 (no catalogue).

Weapons have long fascinated collectors and have found their place front and centre in curiosity cabinets. Swords, lances, pikes, halberds, crossbows, arguebus, and pistols guickly rounded out the collections of royal princes, aristocrats, and military men of the Ancien Régime. Often these collections were placed next to the halls of armour to valorise the military heritage of the nobles. One common practice was to display these war pieces in the form of trophies on the walls, with a cluster of weapons placed around a shield. Engravings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also show panoplies of European weapons placed with bows and arrows, and exotic war hammers from distant lands.

In fact, equipment used by the 'savages' very quickly became a category of objects highly sought-after by collectors. A clear display of human ingenuity, exotic weapons sparked the most interest after antique and medieval weapons: Turkish daggers and bows, Tartar iron clubs, Parthian quivers, scimitars from Damascus, Roman swords and spears, arranged next to Canadian and Brazilian arrows, cannibal war clubs, and so on.

Following in the wake of Iberian navies, Nor-

man, Picard, and Breton sailors began crossing the Atlantic as early as the sixteenth century and developed regular trade with the Amerindians. first along the coastline in Brazil. Among the earliest objects brought back by the Europeans exploring American coasts, one category sets itself apart immediately: the clubs, often called in the language of the Renaissance espées. One special weapon fascinated them immediately: a war club used not only in battle by the Tupinamba (natives of the modern-day region of Rio de Janeiro) but above all for executing captives who were destined to be eaten. We have many descriptions of these 'cannibal' clubs, and some are today conserved in European museums. Later, French colonisation of North America, the Antilles, and the Guianas provided the opportunity to send back uncountable bows, arrows, shields, and lances, but above all war clubs, a favourite weapon of the New World peoples. Now heirs to these cabinets of curiosities, museums thus harbour numerous clubs in their collections. Made of hardwood, these clubs were better conserved throughout the centuries than other pieces that no longer exist, due to their more fragile material (feathers or textiles). In Rennes, the Marquis de Robien, like his

contemporaries, collected such weapons. An old inventory notes an 'Iroquois' club, today unfortunately absent. The mention 'Iroquois' should be taken with precaution as to its precise ethnic attribution, but nonetheless signals a North American origin, very likely of the Great Lake Region, between modern-day Canada and the United States. Another club claims to derive from the northern coasts of South America or the Caribbean. This weapon, 86.5 centimetres long, at its widest 10.2 centimetres, and 2.3 centimetres thick, was sculpted from a dark, very dense tropical hardwood which remains to be identified. The wooden bar is rectangular, carved in the shape of a dovetail at one end and square-shaped at the other, the handle end. The club is carved on its two large faces with circular and diamond motifs. As is the case with the vast majority of ethnographic pieces of this period, no mention exists as to its provenance. In the **FIG.91** Club, French Guiana or the Caribbean; wood sculpted in the form of a dovetail join and engraved on both sides, 86.5 x 10.2 x 2.3 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.772).

FIG.92 The Orion Nebula with, from left to right and top to bottom,  $\alpha$  Betelgeuse,  $\lambda$  Heika or Meissa,  $\gamma$  Bellatrix, then the belt with  $\zeta$  Alnitak,  $\epsilon$  Alnilam,  $\delta$  Mintaka, finally at the bottom  $\alpha$  Saiph and  $\beta$  Rigel.

inventories of the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes, it is attributed to the Guianas, but this attribution was established a posteriori.

In fact, clubs of the same shape do exist in many European museums (particularly in France and the United Kingdom), traditionally classed as coming from the Guianas, that is to say, from the countries to the northeast of South America. Even if the origin is not very specific, it is often understood implicitly by French museums that these clubs come from French Guiana, and for museums in Great Britain, Guyana (British Guiana) is often evoked, the colonial link serving as proof of provenance. As to the ethnic attribution, they are traditionally connected to Amazonian groups of the Caribbean language. But which account is true?

Some very similar-looking clubs do exist, collected from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards and mentioned as originating from different parts of the Guianas. Sometimes their ethnicity is known (most often they are identified as being from the Caribbean family). However, for the pieces entering Europe earlier on, we do not have - except for a few very rare exceptions - any information as to where they were found, and even less as to which groups used them. This is the case of the war club of the Marquis de Robien, which dates a minima to the first half of the eighteenth century. The fact is that all these pieces do have similarities, but were somewhat clumsily regrouped under a vast and vague 'Guianese' label, despite being clubs of such varying shapes, sizes, and ages. While the vast majority seem to come from French Guiana, Suriname, and Guyana, we must not exclude a wider origin including also the north coasts of Brazil to the west of the Amazon, those of Venezuela, and also the islands of the Antilles.

The Marquis de Robien's club belongs to a category of relatively large clubs, in comparison to later pieces that measure only thirty or forty centimetres. It bears a geometric decoration, as



Witness to the French colonisation of the Antilles and of French Guiana in the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, the chroniclers delivered descriptions of weapons similar on all points. Their accounts all describe large flat clubs with sharp angles, made of dense wood, often named boutou. In 1647 Raymond Breton (1609-1679) described the Kalinago of the Petites Antilles: 'their weapons are the boutou, the bow and arrow. The boutou is a sort of flat club, square at the ends, an inch thick, three feet long or two and a half, of green wood or Brazilwood, and other strong, heavy and massive woods.' In his book about Equinoctial France published in 1743, concerning the Amerindians of French Guiana, Pierre Barrère (1690-1755) gives a similar description: 'The boutou which we elsewhere call a war club or skull crusher, because its primary use for the Indians is to crush the skull with one blow, is a sort of ruler an inch thick, two feet long, narrow in the middle and three or four inches wide at the two ends, which are very sharply angled. It is customary to make this club out of ironwood, letterwood, or another very hard wood.'

The club is an excellent weapon in close or hand-to-hand combat, complementing the bow and arrow used at a distance. Towards 1700 an anonymous source described the practices of the natives of Saint Vincent's Island: 'When the Caribs go to war, they have their bows in their left hands and the arrows that they lift over their shoulder, they have a big dagger attached at the belt and in their right hand a very heavy club of extremely hard wood, about four feet long, a bit flat at the end, which is about eight inches

around. They decorate this weapon with chiselling and paint it red and black: they call this a boutou.' The engraved decorations on these clubs did not go unnoticed by the chroniclers. In the beginning of the eighteenth century, Jesuit Adrien Le Breton (1662-1701), a missionary on Saint Vincent, reported having seen boutou decorated 'on both sides, with varied grooves filled in, not ungracefully, with white, black, and red'. In fact, on many of these clubs, geometrical and abstract motifs have been observed, carved into the dark wood, and often covered with kaolin, a white clay used for contrast. It remains very difficult to interpret the significance of these designs, but recent ethnological studies of Amazonian people have revealed their symbolism: the motifs decorating the club in Robien's cabinet may represent the Orion constellation, whose four trapezoidal stars are an omnipresent element in several Amerindian mythologies.

Beyond its function as a weapon for close combat, the club carried a strong social dimension because it could also be used to execute enemy captives as part of anthropophagic rituals carried out by numerous Amerindian communities in the Guianas, Brazil, and the Antilles. An anonymous author said to be from Carpentras related his stay with the Kalinago people of the Lesser Antilles in 1619-1620, and told how when returning from a warrior expedition, the Kalinago people 'shared the prisoners amongst themselves'. He was present at a sacrifice during an important festival with all the island's inhabitants, which involved much food and drink. After complex dances and rites, after different mock executions, the prisoner (who had been made to drink and eat abundantly) was finally killed. Using a boutou 'he who had captured the prisoner during the battle gave him a blow on the neck so hard that he fell down dead. Unrestrained, the oldest captain cut him into pieces to be butchered, and the next day he was eaten by the whole group, leaving only his member which was thrown into the sea and his head which they dragged into the ashes waiting to give it to the first of their friends who came to see them; and of the bones they made flutes.' Some carvings and drawings represent the Amerindians of the Antilles and South American mainlanders armed with their clubs. One of the oldest representations is among the most spectacular and shows a native armed with a boutou, similar on all counts to those described above, in

the act of breaking the skull of an enemy lying on the ground. This scene dates from around 1590 and apparently took place on the coast of the island of Trinidad or modern-day Venezuela.

Where exactly does it come from, this war club conserved in the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes? Recreating its origin and precise itinerary remains difficult. Nonetheless, like other pieces in the collection, there is no doubt that this one comes from the French colonies with which the Marquis de Robien was in contact in the first half of the eighteenth century: French Guiana, the Lesser Antilles, Martinique, Guadeloupe, or another neighbouring island.

#### TAÍNO CERAMICS FIGS.94, 95 and 96

#### Restoration

Juliette Vignier-Dupin, 2006

#### **Observations**

785: André Delpuech, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2011 (Taíno, archaeological find, Saint-Domingue); Olivier Kayser, SRA Martinique, Fort-de-France, 2003 (Taíno, archaeological, Saint-Domingue, fourteenth century); Emmanuel Désveaux, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2003 (Antilles, seventeenth century); Christian Feest, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, 1998 (not Mexican).

786: André Delpuech, 2011 (Taíno, archaeological find, Saint-Domingue); Olivier Kayser, 2003 (archaeological find, the Lesser Antilles, twelfth to fifteenth centuries); Emmanuel Désveaux, 2003 (Taíno); Mireille Simoni, Museum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris, 1974 (false if Mexican). 787: André Delpuech, 2011 (Taíno, archaeological find, Saint-Domingue); Olivier Kayser, 2003 (archaeological find, the Greater Antilles, twelfth to sixteenth centuries); Emmanuel Désveaux, 2003 (Taíno); Mireille Simoni, 1974 (false if Mexican).

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785: DELPUECH, 2013 b, p. 593 and fig. 5, p. 603; COULON, 2006, p. 23; AUBERT, 2001 a, p. 209, no. 146; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 149, no. 9064 (Mexico); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 471, no. 5032; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 481, no. 1723 (Mexico); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 302, no. 951.

786: BANÉAT, 1932, p. 149, no. 9065 (Mexico); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 471, no. 5033; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 481, no. 1724 (Mexico); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 302, no. 952.

787: BESSON, 1978, p. 279 (false); BANÉAT, 1932, p. 149, no. 9066 (Mexico); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 471, no. 5034; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 481, no. 1725 (Mexico); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 302, no. 953.

#### **Exhibitions**

Collectors of Souls. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-Europeans Collection in Breton Museums, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 06.12.06-03.03.07; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

'I will describe here several figures of Zemy or Mabouya, earthenware idols, or the kinds of hideous heads that these barbaric peoples adulate. Some are hollow, others solid, but all so poorly formed that it is difficult to identify what they represent.' This is how the Marquis de Robien wrote about these ceramics in his Description historique des collections conservées dans son cabinet. A century later, in 1850, in the inventory compiled by Hyacinthe Pontallié (1796-1851), three objects matching Robien's descriptions were listed: 'no. 359. Rough earthenware vase topped with a hideous figure whose head is in the form of a bottleneck, passing for an idol (Mexican art?) - quite well preserved' and 'no. 360 two small terracotta heads, extremely rough work, similar to previous - fragments of vases?' The first piece was even the subject of a drawing in the Description (FIG.93). These three ceramic objects are still conserved in the Musée des beaux-art de Rennes, and their unusual origin has made them important markers in the history of American archaeological

In the cabinets of curiosities of the Ancien Régime, the great majority of exotic objects brought back from the New World through exchanges with or looting of Amerindian populations were ethnographical pieces. The field of archaeology did not really exist at the time, and only a very few pre-Columbian remains made it into European cabinets: they often came from accidental discoveries, or, in countries rich in precious metals, from the pillaging of tombs and other temples.

The three ceramic pieces acquired by the Marquis de Robien possibly became part of his cabinet (at least for the vase topped with an animal figure) in 1735. An inventory from this date mentions an 'earthenware Penates god', which may correspond to it.2 Unlike the attributions noted in the nineteenth century, these objects did not come from Mexico. but from the Greater Antilles. They were ceramics from the Taíno, a people who lived on the islands of Puerto Rico, Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic), on the eastern side of Cuba, the Virgin Islands, and the Bahamas, at the time of the European conquest in the late fifteenth century. To their great misfortune, they were the first inhabitants of the New World to come into contact with Europeans in 1492 during Christopher Columbus's first voyage (1451-1506), and were soon



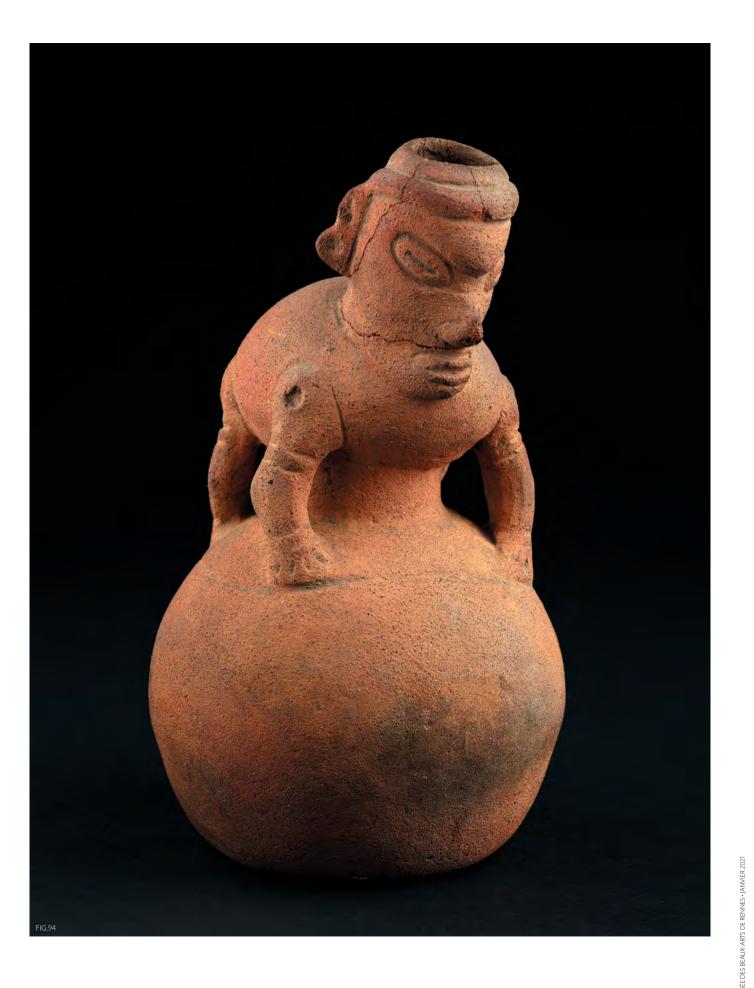
FIG.93 Drawing of the Taínos ceramics piece in Robien's manuscript *Description historique de son cabinet*, ca. 1740, pl. 9 (Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, Rennes, MS 0547).

FIG.94 Bottle crowned with a four-legged being, Taínos, Haiti, Saint-Domingue archaeological find; terracotta, 18.5 x 10.3 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.785).

wiped out due to war, slavery, and illnesses imported from the Old World.

The three pieces that arrived in Rennes during the 1730s were archaeological remains resulting from accidental discovery during earthworks or in caves. Their exact origin cannot be ascertained for certain, however, there are indications that allow us to draw some conclusions. The style of these ceramics ascribes them to the culture that contemporary archaeology has named 'Chicoide' or 'Chican ostionoid' (from the name of the Boca Chica site on the southern coast of the Dominican Republic) which flourished from approximately the twelfth century until the Spanish Conquest. These objects are related to ceramics from the island of Hispaniola, the main island of the Taíno civilisation.

For the moulded head 794.1.787, it is still difficult to identify the creature represented: it could be



<sup>1</sup> ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 2, 'Ouvrages de l'Art', fol. 21 r° lines 9–13.

<sup>2</sup> Fonds Kerouartz, AD 29, copie au musée des beaux-arts de Rennes.

the head of an anthropomorphised fruit-eating bat. An account given by Ramon Pané (1571 †), a monk who accompanied the first conquistadors, reveals that according to the religious beliefs of the Taíno, in the origins of time, when animals were indistinguishable from humans, men were fruit-eating bats and women were frogs. This representation could therefore be that of an animalised man, a bat ancestor, recognisable by the large ears placed on either side of its head, and its nose marked with an upside-down 'Y', the exact representation of the nostrils of a fruit-eating bat (FIG.95).

The quadruped, a moulded and incised ornament that decorates the upper part of a bottle for water or yucca beer (manioc), could be a dog (794.1.785, FIG.94). The Amerindian communities of the Antilles had great esteem for dogs: sepulchres for dogs have been found associated with those of humans, and many representations of canines exist in archaeological findings from before the Common Era.

At the time when Robien acquired his pieces, the western part of the island of Hispaniola. Spanish Santo Domingo, had become a French colony under the name of Saint-Domingue and this had been official since 1697. In the eighteenth century, it was one of the most important and wealthiest colonies in the world, the 'pearl of the Antilles', which, at the cost of the massive deportation of African slaves, brought riches and opulence to the kingdom of France, and especially to its ports on the Atlantic Coast. It is more than likely that the Taíno pieces, now conserved in Rennes, came from this colony, the current Republic of Haiti. The commercial links between Saint-Domingue and the cities of Brittany, Poitou, and Aquitaine, were at their peak, and there were strong connections between merchants and scholars on both sides of the ocean. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that the piece inventoried in 1735 as an 'earthenware Penates god' must have been acquired, along with other pieces, from Antoine-Gabriel de Busserolles, the Marquis de Vienne, who was briefly the governor of Saint-Domingue from October 1731 to February 1732, the date of his death. He was married to Renée-Jeanne de Kerouartz on 31 August 1712 and had a family *hôtel particulier* located on the Rue de la Rampe in Brest.

Several documents confirm the archaeological

observations made in French Saint-Domingue

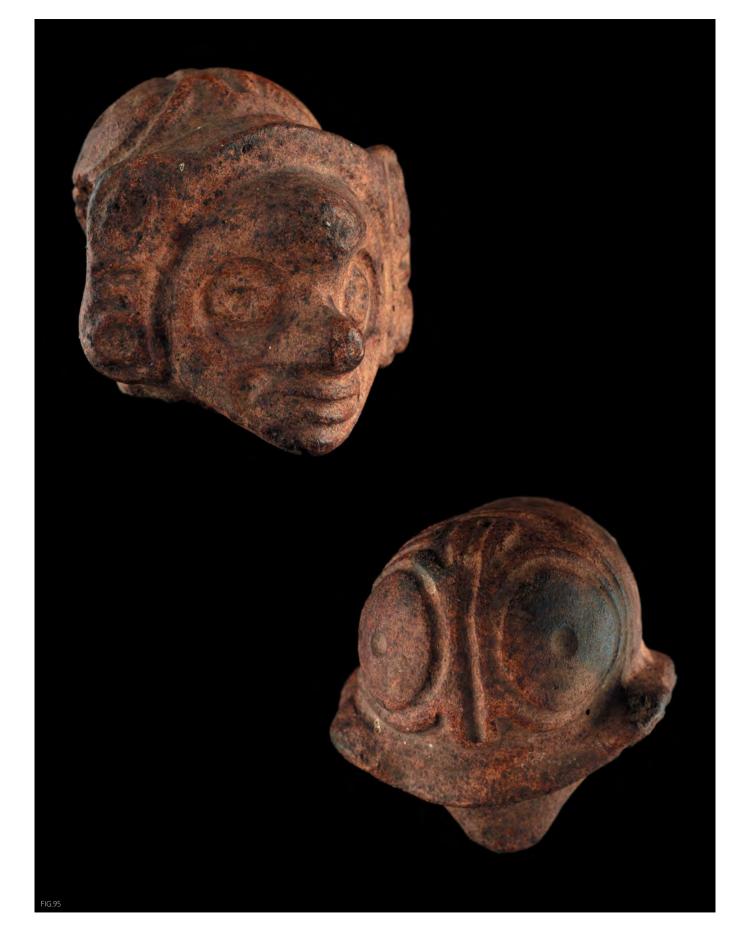
in the eighteenth century, such as the delivery of archaeological curiosities to mainland France. It

is interesting to note that the first explicit mentions of archaeological discoveries are contemporary to the inventory date of the Taíno bottle in Rennes. They appear in the 1730 publication by Father Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix (1682-1761). This book was in fact mainly the result of work by one of the first naturalist missionaries to be permanently established in Saint-Domingue, the Jesuit Jean-Baptiste le Pers (1675-1735), who served as a priest in one of the French colony's northern parishes from 1704 to 1735. He studied botany and natural history and wrote a voluminous manuscript of notes and observations made during his eighteen years spent on Saint-Domingue. His documents were taken up by his Jesuit colleague Father de Charlevoix and published in France in 1730 under the title Histoire de l'isle espagnole ou de Saint-Domingue, in two volumes. Charlevoix mentions 'the different figures within which they [the Amerindians] represented their divinities', and his text was accompanied by (the era and religion at the time meant that this was de rigueur) harsh judgments: 'They were all hideous; the most tolerable were those of a few animals, like toads, turtles, garter snakes, and caimans. But most of the time, they were horrible and monstrous human figures, which all had something bizarre and awful about them. [...] They called these idols Chemis or Zemés. They carved them out of chalk, stone, or terracotta.'3 Note that Robien, in his description of these pieces from the Antilles in his cabinet, mentioned 'Zemy'; today the word is spelt 'zemi' and designates the spirits and divinities of the Caribbean American Indians. 'Mabouya', another term used by the Marquis, harks back to the spirits of the Kalinagos, Amerindians from the Lesser Antilles, described by French missionaries in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Our collector from Rennes was clearly familiar with publications from seve-

FIG.95 Adorno, sculpted figure, fragment of vase or statuette, Taínos, Haiti, Saint-Domingue archaeological find; terracotta, 5.7 x 7.5 x 6.5 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.787).

Probably the first known reference to archaeological artefacts from Hispaniola can be found in Charlevoix's text: 'In several places on the Island we can find figures of Zemés, & this is how we know where there was previously a settlement. We can draw the same conclusion about some piles of shells that we find under the earth, because these islanders ate many species of fish, & if we dig but a little, we soon make some curious discoveries: because we can see objects used daily by these peoples; earthen pots, dishes for cooking Cassava, axes & small golden blades that they hung from their nostrils, & sometimes ears; but most especially we can discover a quantity of Zemés in all styles.'4 Other archaeological investigations continued in the colony throughout the eighteenth century and until the insurrection by slaves that led to the independence and proclamation of the Republic of Haiti, on 1 January 1802.

At the same time as these early investigations were being carried out in the field during the eighteenth century and the creation of this early semblance of a museum, it can be noted that a certain number of archaeological objects crossed the Atlantic Ocean and joined cabinets established in Europe. Moreau de Saint-Méry (1750–1819) recounts that in the Borgne cave, among the archaeological remains discovered there, M. Arthaud 'gave to M. Grandclas, a doc-



<sup>3</sup> CHARLEVOIX, 1730, vol. 1, p. 54.

**<sup>4</sup>** Ibid., p. 59.

with mouldings.'5 Archaeological pieces from Hispaniola are also mentioned in the cabinet belonging to Antoine-Denis Raudot (1679-1737), commissioner and general inspector of the Marine and former intendant of New France from 1705 to 1710, who went on to become one of the three directors of the Compagnie des Indes created in 1717. Among the list of pieces, we note: 'six pottery heads of ancient Caribbean Savages from Saint Domingue, whose figures were used as divinities, [...], a stone used as an axe by the ancient Savages inhabiting St Domingue.' We have since lost trace of these pieces. The Musée Pincé in Angers has a number of archaeological and ethnographical collections that come from the Americas, including some that seem to have entered France many years ago, in all likelihood in the eighteenth century. This was no doubt the case for two stone pieces from the Antilles. The first is a basalt stone sculpted into the shape of a human head, mentioned as coming from Saint-Domingue. The second, with no precise origin noted, is a hafted anthropomorphic axe typical of the Taíno from Hispaniola. It has two old handwritten notices: on the stone, written in ink, can be read 'fetish stone axe', and an affixed label reads 'no. 105, stone mace copying a man's profile (Western Indies. Old collection)'. These two objects must have arrived in France from the former royal colony before the Haitian Revolution. This is the same for the pieces from the Greater Antilles in the collection belonging to Dominique Vivant Denon (1747-1825), now conserved in the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac. Within that collection, sixty pre-Columbian pieces were listed, the majority of which (fifty objects) come from the Antilles. They are primarily fragments and ceramic moulds from the Chicoide culture. Four stone pieces have been preserved, including an anthropomorphic axe and a basalt statuette, also anthropomorphic.

tor in Paris, a black earthenware cup decorated

Among other pieces sent to France from Saint-Domingue many years ago, mention has been found of Taíno pieces discovered in Saint-Domingue in 1720. While staying in Haiti in 1826, Alcide d'Orbigny (1802-1857) recounted

in 1836 his visit to a cabinet with many antiquities collected from the local area. He observed 'animal and human figurines, sculpted stones like those found in Saint-Domingue in 1720',6 and he published a plate entitled 'Antiquités des Antilles' of the aforementioned pieces, specifying that they were to be found in the 'Royal Library'. As of today, the pieces have not been found; the Taíno ceramics in Robien's collection inventoried in 1735, are therefore among some of the oldest pieces still conserved and indexed.

FIG.96 Adorno, sculpted figure, fragment of vase, Taínos, Haiti, Saint-Domingue archaeological find; terracotta, 11 x 7.5 x 5 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.786).



**<sup>5</sup>** MOREAU, 1984, vol. 2, note p. 656.

<sup>6</sup> D'ORBIGNY, 1836, p. 15.

### BEYOND TONALÁ

### REFLECTIONS ON THE DIVERSITY OF AMERICAN ORIGINS AT THE TIME OF THE VICEROYALTY

FIG.97 Vessel from Natá, Panama, colonial period, 17th-18th centuries; fired clay burnished with stone, plaster highlights, black coating and gilding, 33.7 x 31.2 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beauxarts de Rennes (794.1.789).

#### **EARTHENWARE VESSELS** FIGS.97 and 98

#### Restorations

Laboratoire Arc'Antique, Nantes, 1997 and 2013 Atelier régional de restauration, Kerguéhennec, Bignan, 2006

#### **Observations**

Silvia Seligson Behrenfeld, Museo Nacional de las culturas, Mexico, 2017 (Mexico doubtful); Concepción García Saiz, musée de l'Amérique, Madrid, 2007 (Tonalá, Jalisco, Mexico); Christian Feest, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, 1998 (New Spain, Andes?).

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#### **Exhibitions**

Collectors of Souls. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collections in Breton Museums, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 06.12.06-03.03.07; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

#### IINTRODUCTION

The period of the American viceroyalty took place in a context of cultural globalisation that at times can be difficult to comprehend in all its complexity. Namely, it seems to me that the absence of homogeneous collections, the difficulty in studying earthenware items that generally originated at a great distance from one another, and the lack of interest in decorative and industrial arts until only recently have not facilitated the characterisation and classification of ceramics produced in the Americas at the time.

Post-conquest Mexico became a focal point for a global market within which products from Asia, Europe, and other American territories converged, as did Lima and other large cities. Some of these commodities were better known by their place of acquisition or commercialisation than by their true place of manufacture. The Mexican 'label' Guadalajara de Indias, well known for its Mexican ceramics, also included items produced all across the Americas, which brings uncertainty to this denomination. Something similar occurred in the nineteenth century with 'Panama' hats, which were manufactured in Jipijapa, Ecuador, and even earlier with Coromandel screens, which were made in China, but named after the southeast Indian coast from where they were shipped. In my opinion, this



FIG.98 Vessel from Natá, Panama, colonial period, 17th-18th centuries; fired clay burnished with stone, plaster highlights, black coating and gilding, 29 x 28 x 24 cm; the Robien collection, Musée des beauxarts de Rennes (794.1.790).

would explain why almost all goods were attributed to Guadalajara de Indias.

Against this background, I have analysed a pair of colonial-era vessels conserved at the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes. Through these objects, I will broadly examine the different, more or less wellknown centres of production, in order to establish a hypothesis for their attribution. There is no doubt that the distinctive characteristic of these two darkred vessels, or búcaros, is the presence of decorative anthropomorphic mascarons in relief, entirely painted in cream and black colours, with gilded and polychrome motifs (FIGS.97, 98). These beautiful vessels include a lid and two cone-shaped stands that not only support and stabilise them, but also insulate them from the ground.

The profile of these two vessels is characterised by a wide, flared edge, a large conic neck that accounts for almost half of the total height and that is decorated with cabochons<sup>1</sup> or hemispheric 'caps' in the form of painted anthropomorphic heads, a thick globe- or ovoid-shaped body, and two flat handles shaped into an intertwining 'S', also painted. The vessel, as I have mentioned, is connected to another supporting element, with a narrow, flat base that recalls the shape of a reel, or a double cone, also adorned with painted and gilded decorations in one case and perforations in the other. I have taken time over this description because the same characteristics recur several times over in other pieces in different museums, and it is with these precise examples, and not others, that the decorative stippled motifs resembling lace fringes can be recognised. In all likelihood, they were inspired by the decorative motifs from the 'bobbin lace weaving style', which was fashionable in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on Talavera de la Reina pottery.2

The information panel at the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes indicates that these two vessels were acquired in Cuzco, Peru, according to the refe-

rence in Robien's manuscript, which in the middle of the eighteenth century gives them the following origin: 'This clay [from Peru, called Pocaro], from which I have some guite attractive vases produced in Cusco, is quite a nice red with a very fine grain and highly polished.'3 The second example (790) is illustrated on a plate after fol. 6. However, in my opinion, it was not produced in the Viceroyalty of Peru, nor of Tonalá, even though the vases share certain characteristics with these two centres of production. Before presenting my proposition, I would like to introduce some issues around odi-

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF EARTHENWARE COLLECTIONS IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY**

In addition to earthenware goods from Guadalajara de Indias in the seventeenth century (Jalisco, Mexico), those from Santiago de Chile (Chile) and Natá (Panama) were common, as well as those from Guatilán (today Cuautitlán), in New Spain, but to a lesser degree.4

To these should be added productions from the Iberian Peninsula, both Portuguese (Estremoz, Lisbon, Maia) and Spanish (Saelices, El Duque, Plasence, and Salvatierra, among others), which make our ability to attribute provenance more complex and creates a confusing situation, to say the least. What's more, the Guadalajara de Indias denomination is so generic that I wonder if there are not other goods of this type that made their way to Europe under this attribution. Be that as it may, the common thread is the naming of these 'clay vessels' that share similar characteristics, that is, the type of clay, its odiferous qualities, its porosity, the finishing details, and the use to which the vessels were put, etc.

Several reasons may explain the success of some of these centres of production compared to others that must have existed simultaneously in regions with a rich pottery culture. However, the main cri-

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<sup>1</sup> I am really not sure what to call them. In our case, the heads are representative, but in others, they are simply rounded bumps, smooth or ribbed. In silverware, these are called cabochons with heads that are hemispheric, or tear-shaped. They became fashionable in the sixteenth century under the influence of German silverware (see, for example, the chalice of the archpriest of Saragossa, Jeronimo Sora, no. VVAA, 2004: 445). I shall use this term and that of the hemispheric cap to emphasise that there is a succession of bumps and dimples.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the Talavera de la Reina jug with a spout, conserved at the Instituto Valencia de Don Juan, Madrid, no. 1581, dating from the late sixteenth century or early seventeenth century

<sup>3</sup> Robien MSS, fol. 5v lines 7 to 16; see ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, 1st part: Natural History, according to the list of works updated 20 May 2009.

<sup>4</sup> GUTIÉRREZ. 2018.

terium to be retained is the localisation of a type of earth or clay with certain physical properties, thus ensuring that the vessels could be used for containing, filtering, serving, and drinking water that was scented or enriched with other aromatic substances such as ambergris or civet. This is exactly what Lorenzo Magalotti<sup>5</sup> explains in the letter he wrote to the Marquessa de Strozzi in 1695.6 Because of their porosity, these containers sweated water to the exterior surface. As the water evaporated, the interior of the vessel gradually chilled. Thanks to this process of evaporation, these types of clay vessels could also be used as humidifiers and air fresheners. As has often been noted, small fragments of the clay were also highly prized by ladies as an edible delicacy (and were even said to have contraceptive effects). At any rate, these were exotic objects that brought prestige and status to their owners.7

I find the enormous quantity of pieces that some people were able to collect in the seventeenth century surprising. It indicates both the existence of extraordinarily abundant centres of production, but also the wide circulation of objects within global trade routes, of which there is virtually no longer any trace. It is also interesting to note the specific interest that these collectors had in owning different typologies and products. Their *diversity* (now lost) was one of the key aspects of these great collections.

# GEOGRAPHICAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL VARIABLES

The difficulty in correctly classing terracotta relates to gaps in knowledge concerning its two basic variables, spatial and temporal, which would allow the observable differences between them (their shapes, decorations, motifs, etc.) to be understood. The main centres of production were:

The clay vessels of Guadalajara de Indias

(Jalisco, Mexico): This is numerically the largest

group mentioned in historical collections,8 and

sometimes the only one. A rapid glance at the Oñate collection in the Museum of the Americas<sup>9</sup> enables us to appreciate the predominance of red pieces, polished, without painting, and with a decoration made of bumps and dimples across the whole surface. In another style, they can sometimes be polychrome and seem to have been painted afterwards onto a cream- or white-coloured base. The clay vessels of Chile: There are also hundreds of these vessels listed in inventories. According to Magalotti's letter, the scent of this clay was inferior to that of Guadalajara, although superior in colour, design, and elegance. He added that those that came from New Spain were more 'rudimentary'. 'Those that come from Chile are less appreciated for their scent and more esteemed for their craftsmanship, being absolutely more elegant, decorative, and in their style, of a better design than all others in the Indies. The reason for this refinement in examples from Chile, is that today they are produced entirely under the control of nuns. The only place where they are made is in Santiago, the capital of this part of the kingdom [...].'10 As they were made by nuns, I believe they must have been small, delicate objects that included gold and silver settings.11 The Museum of the Americas conserves some clay vessels from a more recent period, manufactured by the sisters at the convent of Saint Claire in Santiago de Chile, in the first half of the eighteenth century and acquired by the French doctor and botanist Joseph

Dombey (1742–1794), who had participated in Ruiz y Pavón's (1777–1788) botanical expedition. All of these pieces are vessels, *epergnes*, or small, highly decorated boxes.

The clay vessels of Natá (Panama): Ultimately, I am most interested in the pieces from Natá, Natán, or Natal, a locality near Darien in Panama, which produced 'the most precious and delicate'12 búcaros, but which had a lighter scent, as the Cistercians at the Saint-Bernard Convent in Madrid had developed a special technique for 'seasoning' them to remove the odour of the sea that they took on during their trans-Atlantic journey. 13 Magalotti called them 'black clay vessels from Natán, which are the most appreciated for their scent [...]',14 but the Dictionnaire Géographique-Historique des Indes Occidentales, published by Antonio de Alcedo (1735–1812), 15 mentions that they are a 'beautiful crimson' and underlines the excellent quality of their fragrance in the conservation of water. What I find most interesting is the reference from the eighteenth century, which specifies that the clay vessels from Natá were previously exported to Peru, a commerce that lasted until the nineteenth century, according to Felipe Pérez, 16 who said that at Natá, 'búcharos and jugs are made to store water, as well as other clay objects, odiferous and crimson, in no way inferior to those made in Andújar. We do a lot of business with this item; it is highly sought-after on the coasts of the southern sea.' It is possible that in the seventeenth century they were primarily black, and that in the eighteenth century the red version from Natá became more fashionable. Although they are frequently found in large Spanish collections, the documentation indicates that they were not as abundant as those from Guadalajara de Indias, which represented three-quarters of the total production.

With time, the items produced in each locality underwent changes in terms of style, as is evidenced by still-life paintings. Earthenware from the seventeenth century primarily used red clay and nearly all had dimples (Guadalajara de Indias) – in Italy<sup>17</sup> as well as Portugal,<sup>18</sup> and obviously in Spain.<sup>19</sup> That said, still lifes from the eighteenth century depicted polychrome ceramics in the Tonalá style, as can be seen in a painting by Luis E. Meléndez (1716–1780) from the second half of the century.

### A HYPOTHESIS REGARDING DISTINCTIVE FEATURES, INDICATED BY LEADING COLLECTIONS

Fragments of a fine ceramic vessel of red engobe (called CFR),20 have been found in archaeological digs in several different colonial towns, which indicates how widely it was distributed. However, it is important to note that 'all the archaeological specimens found in Ancient Panama' share one characteristic; they are all hemispheric vessels with 'nipples or formations that are circular or globular, evenly distributed around the body',21 that is, with hemispheric caps, like those we have already examined. I would like to return to the question of the provenance of the two vessels in the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes, as they both have a shape and decoration similar to those of pieces found in other European museums. Among them all, the pieces in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum are the oldest examples that are able to provide us with information about where they come from. There are two large vessels in dark red and shiny terracotta, similar to those in Rennes, and which are listed in the 175022 inventory of the imperial treasure as coming from Panama. I would like to put forward the following hypothesis: the vessels

<sup>3</sup> Robien MSS, fol. 5v lines 7 to 16; see ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, 1st part: Natural History, according to the list of works updated 20 May 2009.

<sup>4</sup> GUTIÉRREZ, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Magalotti (1637–1712), an Italian philosopher and poet, wrote a series of letters to the Marquessa de Strozzi, a collector of *búcaros*, in which he described and exalted the characteristics of perfumed ceramics.

<sup>6 &#</sup>x27;Did you know, my dear Madame la Marquessa, that there are three veins of this American aromatic clay that we know of today: Chile, Guadalajara, and Natá or Natán'. Letter from Lorenzo to the Marquessa de Strozzi, 16 September 1695 (see PERUJO, 1972, p. 333).

<sup>7</sup> On the use of these clay vessels or búcaros, see GUTIÉRREZ, 2018. I would like to highlight some articles that address this question: CHERRY, 2004; CURIEL, 1994; GARCÍA, 1991; GARCÍA, 1987; PERUJO, 1972; PLEGUEZUELO, 2000; SESEÑA, 2003 and 2009; MICHAELIS, 1905; VILLANUEVA, 2011; among others.

**<sup>8</sup>** GARCÍA, 1991, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> Nearly one thousand pieces collected by the Countess of Oñate in the seventeenth century and donated in the nineteenth century to what is today the Museum of the Americas in Madrid

**<sup>10</sup>** Magalotti, in PERUJO, 1972, p. 336.

**<sup>11</sup>** See PERUJO, 1972, p. 337.

**<sup>12</sup>** PERUJO, 1972, p. 348.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 348: Magalotti described the complete process in detail...

**<sup>14</sup>** Ibid., p. 335.

**<sup>15</sup>** ALCEDO, 1786, p. 290.

**<sup>16</sup>** SUÁREZ, 1985, p. 222.

**<sup>17</sup>** Giuseppe Recco (1634–1695).

**<sup>18</sup>** Josefa de Óbidos (1630-1684).

<sup>19</sup> Juan de Espinosa (documented betwen 1628 and 1659); Juan Bautista de Espinosa (ca. 1585–1641); Antonio de Pereda (1611–1678); Pedro de Camprobín (1605–1674); Juan van der Hamen y León (1596–1631); Juan de Zurbarán (1620–1649); Bernardo Polo (active in the second half of the sixteenth century), among others.

<sup>20</sup> ROVIRA, 2010, pp. 45 and 49.

**<sup>21</sup>** Ibid., p. 52.

with bumps and hollows were produced in Guadalajara de Indias (Mexico), while those with rounded caps, some of which have faces on them, are more likely to have come from Natá.

These types of vessels share common features: the use of gilt or silver painting and the presence of rounded reliefs, which in some cases are faces, half-spheres, or notched cabochons. The Natá decorations are entirely different to those produced in Guadalajara de Indias.<sup>23</sup> The polychrome decoration that I suggest should be considered as being from Natá uses touches of black on the faces in relief, but also, and more especially, gilded polychrome with a recurring decorative motif made of semi-circular stippling filled with parallel lines.

A pair of very similar vessels are conserved at the Museum of the Americas and are believed to have been created in Natá. The first of the two has the same mascarons as the vessels from Vienna and Rennes, but only on the examples from Vienna and Madrid are the eyes painted in black. On the lower part of the vessel, bulging elements that form the last row have also been identified on various vessels in the Oñate collection and share the same characteristics - a very high neck, a flared edge and hemispheric caps, spiral handles - which until now had been classified as coming from the Guadalajara de Indias. I believe that this black vessel represents the most famous products from Natá in the seventeenth century. The decoration of this green, yellow, red, white, and gilded vessel features a stippled motif, as well as crosses inserted into the circles edged with a fringe. This decoration, just like the one that has a base, is once again very similar to the vessels at the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes. Now that these elements have been defined, we can begin identifying the provenance of other

examples from various collections, which are all in black ceramic, highly burnished, with the same or similar form to those in the Museum of the Americas and decorated with gold and silver settings. What is the exact provenance of these other pieces? Once again, they are listed in the catalogue as being Mexican from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but in my opinion, they could well be from Natá in Panama, from the second half of the seventeenth century.

Could Robien have acquired Panama ceramics from Peru? We have already indicated that the principal market for Panama ceramics was the city of Lima, and that from there, they were sold throughout the rest of the Viceroyalty. One part of this production arrived in Mexico, where, for example, it was acquired by Doña María Luisa de Toledo (1656-1707), in around 1670,25 and then undoubtedly exported to Spain or Italy via dispatched goods or with the acquisitions of other travellers. A similar case to Robien has in fact been observed; the naturalist Alcide d'Orbigny (1802-1857) acquired ceramics from the Americas on behalf of the Muséum d'Histoire naturelle, which are today located in the Cité de la céramique de Sèvres (MNC 1754). This scientist voyaged primarily in the southern part of the American continent, travelling across Brazil and Peru. The piece in question was acquired in Bolivia, and although today it has been attributed to Tonalá, it was only listed recently as being produced in Peru.26 And so once again, the presence of a large vessel with a globe-shaped belly and long conic neck, which previously had been attributed to Peru (or more simply had been purchased there) and listed as being produced in Tonalá, is similar, in my opinion, to pieces produced in Natá (Panama).

### CONCLUSION

In this brief overview of the most common types of ceramics produced in the Americas, I have attempted to characterise a group of mediumsized vessels based on different criteria (shape, dimensions, decoration, colours). I have verified that those that have a large neck, flared edges, flattened spiral-shaped handles, dimpled decorations (heads or hemispheric caps) with stippled painting and fringes, and with varied colours and considerable gilding, could correspond to ceramics from Natá. I believe, therefore, that the two vessels, or búcaros from the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes could have come from this centre of production. Even so, the differences between the two examples from Rennes and the documented pieces from the seventeenth century (Vienna and Madrid) remind me of the limits of geographical (different workshops) and chronological (trends in fashion) variables, which could indicate a later style. The vessels from Rennes seem to me to be from Panama, but perhaps they date instead from the early eighteenth century?

Despite the complexity, my intention is to focus on recognising the diversity of classifications in this fantastic group of American *búcaros*.

<sup>22</sup> I would like to thank Dr Paulus Rainer, curator at the Kunstkammer & Schatzkammer in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum for having shared this information from the 1750 inventory relating to the above-mentioned pieces, apparently cited in the museum inventory of 1896, in which it notes that the vessels had been acquired during the reign of Philip IV of Spain. The chronology would in fact correspond to the middle of the seventeenth century, if we are to judge by their similarities with those in the Oñate collections.

<sup>23</sup> This was a clear difference found in both the seventeenth century (see the two vessels with lids acquired on 10 June 2015 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, with spiral motifs forming stars or flowers painted with fine lines in black and white, on www.metmusem.org, 2015.45.1a, b) and the eighteenth century (vases decorated with flowers).

<sup>24</sup> An apparently 'Mexican' 40 x 40 cm *búcaros* (Bd. 3616) and a plate or dish, also in black ceramic with a stippled, gilded decoration (Bd. 3613, VVAA, 2004: 560 and 562) are conserved in the Galerie du Palais Mozzi Bardini in Florence. Historically (and without provenance), this type of *búcaros* was recorded in the account of the estate of Ferdinando de' Medici (1663–1713), the son of Cosimo III, which mentioned 'a large black, varnished búcaro vessel, with gold and silver flowers [...] another similar one with the body covered in protuberances [...]' (VVAA, 2004: 560). Again in Italy, at the Museo degli Argenti, another similar vessel is conserved, red with dimpled elements and set with silver, which comes from the collection of the above-mentioned Ferdinando de' Medici (Bg.1917 (II), no. 24), in MOSCO, 2004, no. 174, fig. 8.

<sup>25</sup> See GUTIÉRREZ, 2018.

**<sup>26</sup>** TRICORNOT, 2013, p. 36.

### **IDOL** FIG.99

### Restoration

Olivier Morel, Besançon, 1996 Centre régional de restauration et de conservation des œuvres d'art, Vesoul, 1996

### Observations

Luisa Vetter Parodi. Archivo General de la Nación, and Paloma Carcedo Muro de Mufarech, archaeologist, Lima, 2018 (invention); Claude Chapdelaine, University of Montreal, 2018 (various); Steve Bourget, Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2018 (decorative colonial invention); Nicolas Goepfert, CNRS - Panthéon-Sorbonne, Nanterre, 2018 (authentic elements but fake ensemble); Carole Fraresso, archaeologist consultant, 2014 (syncretic figurine? colonial period?): Éloïse Falaise, consultant, 2014: Juan Carlos Estenssoro Fuchs, Université de Lille III, 2005 (old pieces, European assemblage); César Itier, INALCO, Paris, 2005 (Incan base, Mochica mask, European assemblage); Olivier Kayser, SRA Martinique, Fort-de-France, 2003 (period of colonial syncretism?); Emmanuel Désveaux, Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2003 (Object of contact, possibly Peru); Christian Feest, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, 1998 (Inca, Peru); Concepción García Saiz. Museum of the Americas. Madrid. 1997 (European americanerie); Alicia de Reichel Dolmatoff, Museo del Oro, Bogotá, 1996 (Peruvian americanerie?); Pascal Mongne, CRAP, Université Paris I - Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1996 (americanerie): Éric Taladoire. Université de Paris I - Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1996 (composite object, for exportation).

### **Bibliography**

FALAISE, 2020, p. 22; COULON, 2006, pp. 28-29; MONGNE, 2003, p. 73; AUBERT, 2001 a, p. 183, no 112; COULON, 2001, p. 43; COU-LON, 1996, p. 238; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 149, no 9061; BANÉAT, 1909, p. 471, no 5030; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 481, no 1722; ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 301-302, no 950.

### **Exhibition**

Collectors of Souls. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collections in Breton Museums, Rennes. Musée des beaux-arts. 06.12.06-03.03.07.

Rare, strange, and unique: this is effectively how this statuette appears. It does not seem to have an equivalent in any public collection in the world and its interpretation has been the subject of all kinds of hypotheses. It is recognised as a genuine, possibly syncretic, cult object in the Antilles, but most likely Chimú owing to its silver jaguar mask. It has also been diagnosed as containing Incan (or Wari) elements, given the presence of a frontal sun and solar rays, but also the base of the statuette in the form of a kéro. Finally, owing to its composite character, there have been attempts to synthesise its identity as being that of a fake object for trafficking americaneries destined for Europe.

It is most likely from his Brest-born cousin, the Marquise of Vienne née Kérouartz (see André Delpuech, Taino Ceramics, pp. 208-213), the widow of the then-deceased ephemeral governor of Saint-Domingue, Antoine-Gabriel de Vienne 'and a silver god from Peru missing half of its crown' is indicated in a small handwritten catalogue twelve pages long, corresponding to a coin and medal collection and 'other things' received by Robien on 7 July 1735. Owing to the precious materials of gold and silver with which it is covered but also to its frightening crowned face, and possibly also given the proximity of the Antilles with Mexico, Robien thought it must have been a Mexican idol. The object comprises a small, wooden, paper-coated, cruciform support that adorns plates of a very pure silver, themselves adorned with small designs in electrum (a gold and silver alloy). These slats are attached with sil-

No other figurine comparable to this one has been recovered to date in Latin America, despite the constant progress in archaeological discoveries, nor reported in any old collection of any kind. The silver work and, broadly, the style of fabrication of silver statuettes confirm the Incan area of origin, a provenance that has been proven by laboratory metal analyses.

However, it must be concluded that the constitution of the support-matrix, a statuette in wood covered in paper, but also the systematic use of European forms possibly betray its real source of creation: the small star, moon, and animal designs, the posture of the character with its arms outstretched, its attributes (cape, crown, earring) seem more likely to correspond to a Western imaginary, fantasising about the reality

FIG.99 Idol, Peru, first millennium AD. (Chim.); 16th century (Wari or Incan colonial period); European mounting, early 18th century (?); silver plates and electrum riveted onto a wooden core covered with paper, earring in pure gold, 28.5 x 19 x 8.8 cm, 420 grams; drawn in the manuscript Description historique de son cabinet, ca. 1740, pl. 12 (Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, Rennes, MS 0547); the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.784).

FIG.100 Figurine, Peru, 1450-1532, funereal treasure originally clothed and decorated; silver or electrum, 15 x 4 x 3.8 cm; Museum fünf Kontinente, Munich

FIG.101 Cup, Chimú-Inca, Peru, ca. 1470; gold repoussé work, 18.5 x 11.4 cm; sale Millon lot 78, Drouot, 19 April 2019.

of the ancient Americans that were generally little known in the eighteenth century. It is also possible that it might be an attempt to render scattered archaeological remains coherent through de Busserolles (1732 †) that Robien acquired it: a didactic reconstitution, since the Europeans attested to excavations in Incan tombs during the years 1705-1725.

Without concluding too hastily, it is therefore plausible to see this work as a singular object made instead in Hispaniola by indigenous artisans (possibly from true archaeological remains - yet the conservation of the metal is something of a mystery - and possibly inspired by various models existing at the time?) but designed for European collectors, who were generally fascinated by the strange and barbaric. Robien does not seem to have been fooled, since the man who honoured the skill of the Indian artisans in his manuscript appears very circumspect concerning his idol made 'of poor gold' and 'of such poor construction'. His endless fascination for beliefs and religions may perhaps have prompted him nevertheless to provide a full-page

So, situated somewhere between the syncretic idols of America, the Arumbaya fetish invented by Hergé (1907-1983), or the magic dolls of Marie Vassilieff (1884-1957) sits this very rare and precious testimony to Western attempts to understand the new world that was just opening



<sup>1 29</sup> AD, of which I have a copy supplied by Gauthier Aubert.

### INUIT KAYAK FIG 102

### Restoration

ARC-Nucléart, Grenoble, 1997 and 2007

### **Observations**

Geneviève Treyvaud, archaeologist, Grand Conseil de la Nation Waban-Aki. Laval University. Quebec, 2017 (Labrador); Harvey Golden, Kayak & Canoe Museum, Portland, 2011 (Canada?); John Porter. Musée national des beaux-arts de Québec, 2003 (Canada, used); Emmanuel Désveaux, Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2003 (Labrador?); Jean-Paul Rousselot, Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich, 1999 (Greenland?); Marie-Paule Robitaille, Musée de la civilisation, Quebec, 1998 (Canada); Christian Feest, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, 1998 (Greenland? East Labrador?); Céline Saucier, Direction Générale du patrimoine. Section archéologie et ethnologie, Quebec, 1976 (Labrador or Baffin Region); Michel Brochu, representative for the Quebec government, 1970.

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GUIGON, 2006, pp. 22–32, 130–132, 183–185; COULON, 2001, p. 43; AUBERT, 2001 a, p. 213, no. 154; COULON, 1996, p. 237; ALIX, 1995, p. 46 and annexes pp. 90–91; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 148, no. 9042 (Labrador); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 470, no. 5023; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 480, no. 1718; ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 301, no. 949 (North America).

### **Exhibitions**

Collectors of Souls. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-Europeans Collection in Breton Museums, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 06.12.06–03.03.07; Le kayak arctique, Concarneau, Musée du bateau, 20.08.87–14.09.87; Exotisme et voyageurs, Saint-Malo, Musée d'histoire, 07.77–10.77; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72–08.72 (no catalogue).

When the analyses brought to bear on the artworks of the cabinet do not involve major contemporary concerns, their meaning, attribution, and origins are hardly the subject of dissension within the community of researchers and curators. But if some certainties are perturbed, then it is an entire heuristic protocol that is called into question once again. Yet, through its attributed origins and its great age, the kayak of the

Robien collection is thought to be the oldest conserved in the world deriving from Labrador... that is, brought back one hundred years prior to the ones donated by Admiral Parry in Exeter in 1821 (Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery, E 801 and E 807). It took nothing less than that fact to feel duty bound to provide specific detail as to the solidity of the hypotheses put forward.

This skiff, which is not cited in Robien's manuscript but appears only in an archive document of 1801, stems at least from one Rennes collection of the eighteenth century, and by default, given the absence of other local cabinets, has been attributed to Robien. Since we could not reproach the collector of 1740 of not having had the overblown precision of the curators of the nineteenth century, we must accept the very reasonable character of this first hypothesis, all the more so in that the object is symptomatic of the curious collector (correlations without geographic origin are specified in: Paul Contant, Poitiers, 1609; Pierre Trichet, Bordeaux, 1635; Léonard Bernon, La Rochelle, 1670; Michel Bégon, Rochefort, 1699).

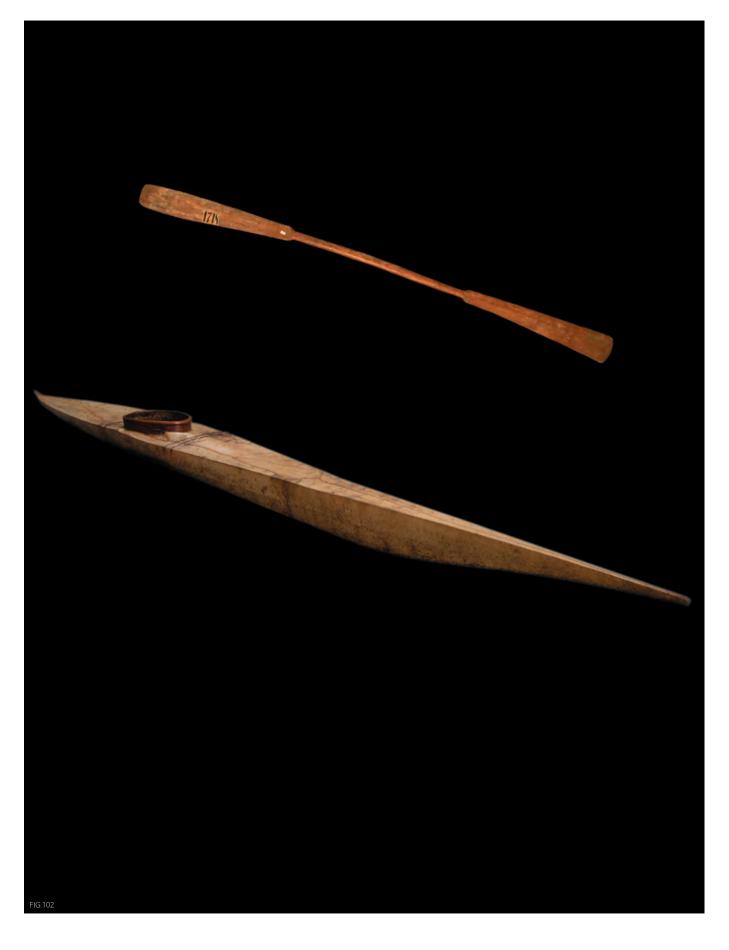
Yet the provenance itself is also debated, since the items of comparison that could by default enable a relative dating within a stylistic evolution are few and far between, despite the fact that the profile here is clearly more Labradorean than Greenlander: the kayaks of Greenland effectively are not lacking in the major post-Renaissance European collections, and were up until now thought to be the oldest to have been preserved (Skokloster, Denmark, 1605; J.-B. Du Tertre, 1654; O. Worm, 1655; M. B. Valentini, 1704). Only a scientific analysis of the sealskins that I have aspired to for twenty years, so far in vain, could settle this matter. For now, most of the researchers plead more in favour of Canada, given the fact that the old Greenland kayaks seem to have never been used, unlike this one. Furthermore, connections between Inuit and Indians were attested during the seventeenth century, making its exchange within New France possible. Finally, the cartography of the provenances of Robien's shells (Antilles, Americas, West African coasts, Indian Ocean, and the islands of Southeast Asia, rather than the Mediterranean or the French coasts of the Atlantic) clearly show that the collector sourced all of his exotic materials via a few intermediaries in the Breton ports, unlike his European objects, which

FIG.102 Kayak with double paddle, Labrador Coast (?), Inuit nation, 17th century (?); hides of young seals sewn onto resinous driftwood ribs, 45 x 685 x 63 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.781).

seem to have been recuperated from old private collections

Like other ingenious creations from nations without writing, outrigger pirogues, skis, and snowshoes, but also the boomerang or the maps of marine currents from the Marshall Islands, etc., the kayak is an extraordinary craft from ancient times, demonstrating the admirable adaptive capabilities of human beings to our environment. Light, practical, reliable, resistant, efficient and effective, able to be equipped with all sorts of fishing tools, it enabled Arctic peoples to travel in groups for migration, but also for hunting and fishing activities.

The beautiful light beige colour of Robien's model indicates that it was built from young specimens of fur seals and the many grey defects on the bow show that it was indeed used, since the sea has left its signature. Unfortunately, the frames that comprise its structure have been devoured by worms over time and only remain attached through the inertia of the skin. During restoration, a seagull's wing was found right at the back of the bow, the presumed remains of one of the navigator's meals...



### **EUCHARISTIC PATEN** FIG. 103

### Restoration

Not yet restored

### Observations

Marie-Chantal de Tricornot. Cité de la Céramique, Sèvres, 2020 (probably Novohispanic); Alfonso Miranda Márquez, Museo Soumaya - Fundación Carlos Slim, Mexico, 2020 (Purépechas, seventeenth century); Karina Corrigan, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, 2019 (Novohispanic); May-Bo Ching, Hong Kong City University, 2018 (non Chinese, Southeast Asia?); Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016 (non Chinese): Geneviève Lacambre. Musée d'Orsay, 2013 (the Indies?); Kung-Shin Chou, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2011 (Southeast Asia?).

### **Bibliography**

BANÉAT, 1932, p. 134, no. 8191 (China); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 448, no. 4717; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 464, no. 1593 (China); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 288, no. 853.

### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

Among the magnificent objects owned by the president Robien, those that came from the New World merit particular attention. Some were supplied by Antoine-Gabriel, the Marguis de Vienne de Busserolles (circa 1648-1732), who was married to Renée Jeanne de Kerouartz (1678-1752), a cousin of the Marquis de Robien. Appointed governor-general of Saint-Domingue (today Haiti) on 5 February 1731, he arrived on the island on 8 October 1731, and remained in office until his death in Fort-Dauphin on 4 February 1732.

Although many of the items given to the ambassador fall under the category of exoticism or sauvagerie, very few pieces come from the Viceroyalty of New Spain (Mexico today). One work, however, stands out from this group, and for many years was the subject of efforts to determine its provenance from regions as varied as China, Singapore, or India.

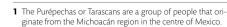
In fact, there is consensus today that this work, an ecclesiastic paten, is from New Spain and dates from the first half of the seventeenth century. It is made out of tecali, a type of alabaster or onvx-marble from the region of Puebla that has a high level of transparency and that, prior to their contact with the West, was considered by Mesoamerican cultures to be a sacred stone. The pre-Hispanic motifs, perhaps from the Purépecha culture<sup>1</sup> (based on the drawings and the use of reddish colours) were painted by an artist from Nueva Galicia.<sup>2</sup> Although no scientific analysis has yet been carried out on this item, the shades indicate the use of carmine, that is, the shiny pigment obtained from the cochineal (C22H20O13), a parasitic insect that comes from Mexico and that can be found in fields of nopal, a type of cactus. When this carmine comes into contact with weak acids such as acetic or citric acid, it loses its intensity. It was most likely by using this procedure that the pink tones were

This paten has six radial compartments and a seventh in the middle, which corresponds to the mystical sum of three from the Trinity and four from the Earth (that is, the seasons of the year, the cardinal points, and the number of continents after the 'Meeting of the Worlds' - the discovery of America by Europeans). As such, it is a representation of God on Earth.

For the Mesoamerican cultures, war was a constant and represented the union of opposing but complementary pairs in the cycles of life and death, and this is why the symbols used on the work make repeated allusion to it. Its elongated shape is significant as it symbolises a west-east orientation. The west is signalled by dark parts that indicate the sun's absence, and the sun is situated at the east, painted in red, a colour symbolising war. The elaborate petals, as well as the beating of birds' wings, break the equilibrium of the air, thus symbolising conflict, in this case the Transfiguration. A bird painted in dark tones unfolds its wings, while on the opposite side, a gold and red rooster looks upwards. Renaissance mythography believed that this animal was devoted to solar divinities, thanks to its ability to drive away the dark and announce

FIG.103 Eucharistic paten or liturgical plate, Mexico, Tecali de Herrera, Puebla, Purépecha culture, ca. 1601-1650; onyx-marble from Tecali de Herrera, sculpted, gilt, and polychrome, 2.3 x 18.8 x 11.1 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.717).

the arrival of light, represented here by the gold-coloured paint. As a symbol of the Passion of Christ, its incorporation into the paten reveals the presence of the body of the Saviour. Each compartment was used for a consecrated host. The Marquis de Robien must certainly have appreciated the object, but likely did not know the exact role it played in the celebration of mass. This piece is closely connected to another, which is part of a liturgical trousseau conserved at the Museo Soumaya - Fundación Carlos Slim in Mexico.



<sup>2</sup> Part of the former Spanish Viceroyalty in Mexico.



# MIISÉE DES BENITS ABTS DE BENINES (IANMIEB 2021

# ASIA IN ROBIEN'S DAY



FIG.104 Jean Jansson, Novus Atlas sive Theatrum orbis terranum in quo Hispaniae, Italiae, Asiae, Africae nec-non Americae, tabulae & descriptiones luculentissima, vol. III, detail of Asia, Amsterdam, 1647; burin and watercolour etching, 37.2 x 49.9 cm (unframed); former collection of the Bibliothèque Saint Michel d'Anvers, 1650; Robien's former library (no. 1650 from the 1749 inventory); Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc (Rés G71²).

CONTE

# ROBIEN: CHINA OR JAPAN?

FIG.105 Anonymous, most likely Christophe-Paul de Robien, *Le château de Firando au Japon*; paper, plume, and brown ink, 17.7 x 14 cm; unknown origins, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes Collection (949.158.5).

FIG.106 Anonymous, most likely Christophe-Paul de Robien, Les magasins hollandais dans l'île de Disma; paper, plume, and brown ink, 17.5 x 14.5 cm; unknown origins, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes Collection (949.158.4).

I think that I became interested in the artistic relationships between Japan and the West at the age of eight, having leafed through a volume of the manga by Katsushika Hokusai (1849 †) acquired at the time by my father at a second-hand bookstore in Dijon; some of the pages are definitively etched into my memory. My father also had me choose a crepon, an anonymous fragment of a triptych, with a snowman, which still hangs at my place. Is it a 'modernised' scene from *The Tale of Genji?* I've been fascinated by travel through the world of objects ever since and especially objects coming from Japan.

Many aspects of the richly diverse collection of President Christophe-Paul de Robien (1698–1756) confiscated during the Revolution have already been studied, but concerning the Far East, and particularly the Japanese objects of his collection of Chinese or Japanese porcelain, these have never been looked at as a whole. Are they Chinese or Japanese? Robien himself does not distinguish between them when he evokes in 1740, in the Description historique des collections conservées dans son cabinet, regarding China, and therefore the Chinese, an 'infinity of their other works, garments, and furniture for their use, not to mention urns of

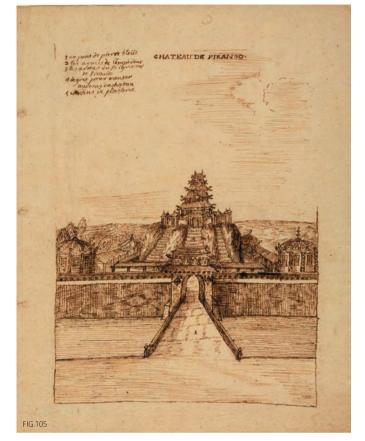
all sizes and porcelains of all kinds, both antiquities and modern pieces.'

Unfortunately, he does not inform us at all regarding the origins of all of these objects from the Far East, which, mostly – although not all of them – were naturally made for export.

It is important to look at how he and his family positioned themselves within the framework of the exchanges between Europe, Japan, and, for some objects, China.

The porcelain homeware – possibly all of it – was intended to decorate the *hôtel particulier* in Rue aux Foulons in Rennes and was found in the apartments rather than in the cabinet of curiosities; it is likely that it was in place from the childhood or teenage years of Christophe-Paul de Robien.<sup>2</sup>

Bearing in mind that the father of our collector, Paul de Robien (1660–1744), a widower and parliamentarian himself, had acquired the *hôtel particulier* on the Rue aux Foulons in 1699, shortly after Christophe-Paul's birth, and may have decorated it in the fashion of the final years of the reign of Louis XIV (1638, 1643–1715). Only the Chinese covered jars with blue-and-white designs (FIG.130), deposited in Port-Louis at the Musée de la Com-





pagnie des Indes, have a very simple mounting, in a style that would be situated more towards the end of the seventeenth century; the others are Japanese and do not have mountings.

Similarly, his library conserved books that were already old, such as Arnoldus Montanus (1625-1683), published in Amsterdam in 1680, Ambassades mémorables de la Compagnie des Indes Orientales des Provinces Unies vers les Empereurs du Japon, which may have contributed to his very early interest in distant cultures. Are the drawings conserved at the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes anonymous or in his hand? These drawings are based on the illustrations on pages 42 and 50-51 of this book that represent Firando (Hirado) (FIG.105) and Disma (Deshima) (FIG.106), successive sites of contact between the Dutch from the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC) and Japan. Founded in 1602, the VOC took advantage of a

confused situation on the Iberian Peninsula and in Flanders to take over control of trade with Japan; it was based in Hirado in 1609, an island not far from Nagasaki. However, the Dutch were not the first.

Long ignored by Europeans, Japan, which was evoked by Marco Polo (1254–1324) upon his return to China as the 'land of gold', could only set the Renaissance navigators to dreaming, and it was to reach Japan that the Genoese Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) left on behalf of the King of Spain, destined for the west and the discovery of America.

Later, the Portuguese who had explored the coasts of Africa and reached the Far West via the Cape of Good Hope, ventured into the Pacific, and in 1543, one of their ships reached the island of Tanegashima in the south of Japan. The Portuguese sailors introduced the musket there; a weapon that was rapidly copied by the Japanese.

**<sup>1</sup>** ROBIEN, 1740.

<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Gauthier Aubert suggests this, see AUBERT, 2001 a.

They also brought Catholicism, which was well and truly in the spirit of the times, soon encouraged by the Jesuit François-Xavier (1506-1552). Trade was, of course, the other driver of this global expansion and the Japanese produced for the needs of the Portuguese, then the Spanish who soon sent Franciscan or Dominican missionaries from the Philippines. But they also created various lacquerwork objects - one of the traditional specialties of Japan in the nanban style (term applied to the Europeans, meaning, 'barbarians of the south'), notably chests or cabinets with many drawers, first with a flap door, then two doors. They are mainly conserved in Spain and Portugal, but a famous example is also found at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, derived from the Ambras Castle and dating from the late sixteenth century.

The Bourguignon parliamentarian Jean-Baptiste François Jehannin de Chamblanc (1722-1797), who was younger than the president Robien, like him, owned an expansive library, natural history collections, and curiosities that were confiscated during the Revolution. The Musée des beauxarts de Dijon thus conserves, stemming from the 'Chinese cabinet' of his hôtel particulier in Dijon, two pieces of furniture that are in fact Japanese: one cabinet in black-and-gilt lacquerwork from the late seventeenth century adorned with landscapes and floral branches and a nanban cabinet whose past history is unknown.3 There is also a one-ofa-kind collection of several dozen small plates in Japanese and Chinese lacquerwork (possibly stock from a French snuffbox manufacturer?), one of which represents a Japanese squirrel.4

Some of these *nanban* cabinets, which are conserved in France at the Musée du monastère royal de Brou in Bourg-en-Bresse<sup>5</sup> or at the Musée Charles-Friry in Remiremont, were brought back much later from the Iberian Peninsula by soldiers, at the time of the Napoleonic Wars.

During what is known as the 'Christian century' in Japan, a first envoy of four young Japanese reached Lisbon in 1584, accompanied as far as Goa in India by the Jesuit Alessandro Valignano (1539-

1606); they visited the King of Spain Philippe II (1527–1589), went to Rome to see the Pope, and met Francesco I de' Medici (1541–1587). They returned to Japan in 1590. Among their gifts, the Pope received a screen (now missing, but known by its engraving) representing the Azuchi Castle, on the shores of Lake Biwa, recently built by Oda Nobunoga (1534–1582), the first unifier of Japan who died in 1582. The castle had already been destroyed by fire when they arrived in Rome, but they couldn't know that...

A second envoy, that of Hasekura Tsunenaga (1571-1622), under the leadership of the Franciscan Spaniard Luis Sotelo (1574-1624), and at the initiative of Date Masamune (1567-1636), lord of Sendai (who had just endured a tsunami), embarked for Europe in 1613 via the Pacific, arriving in Acapulco, leaving some of the Japanese passengers in Mexico, then set out for Europe with the idea of trading with Seville, again leaving some of the Japanese near this city. Among the gifts to the King of Spain Philip III (1578-1621), besides armour, there were again also fragile screens; one of these, representing the city and castle of Osaka, was in my opinion given by Philip III to a noble Austrian whom he had made a knight of the Golden Fleece in 1621; he had been decorating a room of his Eggenberg Castle in Graz since the eighteenth century. Between Spain and Rome the ships had to drop their anchor in the Port of Saint-Tropez due to a storm, so no real connection was thus established with France. A certain 'Mme de Saint-Tropez' left to posterity the tale of what she observed of their customs in a document conserved at the Inguimbertine, the library-museum of Carpentras: she noted, among other details, that they are using chopsticks and used paper napkins.

In the early seventeenth century, in 1609, the VOC established itself on the island of Hirado where, between 1613 and 1623 the British East India Company (EIC) settled, created in 1600 by Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603). Although it was certainly focused on India, this major English company later oriented itself towards direct trade with China.

After the persecutions of Catholics and the prohibition of this religion, when Japan closed its borders in 1640, the Dutch were the only ones among the Europeans to eventually obtain the authorisation to continue to trade with Japan, but they had to leave Hirado in 1641 for Deshima, a small artificial island in the form of a fan, built in the Bay of Nagasaki several years prior, for the Portuguese. The smaller but more numerous Chinese junks were also admitted into Nagasaki; Chinese traders were very active from 1680 onwards, bearing Japanese commodities towards China where Europeans could find them in Macao, Canton (Guangzhou), or Amoy (today's Xiamen, where from 1685 on, the English of the EIC were located), as well as in the ports of Southeast Asia. They were the ones who brought Chinese ceramics as far as Batavia (present-day Jakarta, on the island of Java) where the VOC was based.

It was to the Netherlands that Mazarin (1602-1661), the minister of Louis XIV, sent emissaries to stock up on chests and cabinets in Japanese lacquerwork between 1650 and 1660, which his nephews and nieces would later inherit. The inventory drawn up after his death in 1661 describes around forty of them, as well as a table and a close stool.<sup>6</sup> They are described as 'from China', although, when they can be identified, they are always of Japanese manufacture. According to the heirs, and often as payment for debt, these objects left the family at various dates, some during the early eighteenth century, some in 1802, like the objects that had been conserved by the dukes of Bouillon, descendants of Anne-Marie Mancini (1649–1714), up until the extinction of the family: among these objects, we can cite a very large chest, acquired in 1802 by William Beckford (1760–1844) and that recently entered the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam; or two fine chests, described as 'tombshaped' or 'cauldron-shaped', with drawers and two superimposed lids that open to present new compartments. One, also acquired in 1802 by William Beckford, is conserved at Chiddingstone

belonged to the collection of Dominique-Vivant Denon (1747-1825), director of the Louvre under the Empire, entered the Musée du Petit Palais in Paris in 1902 with the beguest of Auguste Dutuit (1812-1902).8 The cabinets and chests also sold during the eighteenth century were, very often, hewn by the cabinetmakers of the day, since, while they were outmoded, the picturesque and very solid designs in black-and-gold lacquerwork were highly prized. However a close stool in Japanese lacquer with cartouches against a base of lacguered ray skin, a kind of square trunk with a red lacquer interior, derived from Mazarin and having passed from the collection of the last duchess of Mazarin, Louise-Jeanne de Durfort (1735-1781) to that of her father-in-law the Duke Louis-Marie d'Aumont (1709-1782), was acquired in 1782 by Duke Louis François de Vignerot (1696-1788), great-grandnephew of the Cardinal Richelieu, then upon his death in 1788, by the Prince of Condé, Louis V Joseph de Bourbon-Condé (1736-1818). It was confiscated in the Revolution with his collections - the Prince of Condé emigrated and became the leader of counter-revolutionary armies - and when he claimed them in 1816 from Louis XVIII (1755-1824), he was given back what was inscribed on the inventory of the Musée du Louvre, notably what his son had bequeathed to the Duke of Aumale, Henri d'Orléans (1822-1897) and that were the jewels of Chantilly Castle, including a few lidded vases in Imari porcelain and plates in the kakiemon style. In Chantilly there is no more than a large Japanese chest, decorated with roosters, chickens, and chicks, which was listed on the inventory of the Louvre, but this close stool was never found, as the Prince of Condé requested twice, since it had been sent to the Mobilier national. It has been in the collections of the Château de Versailles since the Second Empire.9 The two 'Condé dishes', 10 in black-and-gilt lacquer were not restored to him either (he had not asked for them to be returned); they were to remain in the

Castle.7 near London, the other, which for a while

**<sup>3</sup>** LACAMBRE, 2010, no. 17, repr.; and fig. 32, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> NAGASHIMA, 2013 (the squirrel plate does not figure here, since it is currently being restored).

**<sup>5</sup>** LACAMBRE, 2010, no. 4, repr.

<sup>6</sup> YOSHIDA, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> IMPEY, 2005, repr. p. 88, repr. 134 a, b, c.

<sup>8</sup> LACAMBRE, 2010, no. 14.

**<sup>9</sup>** LACAMBRE, 2010, no. 15; LACAMBRE, 2014, pp. 41–43, repr. fig. 5.

**<sup>10</sup>** LACAMBRE, 2010, no. 19 and no. 20, repr.

Musée du Louvre, along with various coin collections, placed during the Revolution at the Bibliothèque nationale, along with his books. One of the cabinets, of European fabrication, with doors and sides decorated with Japanese Jacquerwork panels, appears in the inventory of the Duke of Bourbon in 1740 and is still found at the Cabinet des Médailles. While Mazarin also had several hangings and carpets from China, it must be noted that he had virtually no porcelain. His inventory of 2,224 items drawn up in 1661, contains only the following mentions:

'260 - A porcelain cup, furnished with gilded silver with a lid decorated with coral."

'311 - Twelve small porcelain cups from India in different styles.'

'355 - [...] three estans porcelain tumblers in a red leather case and three other tumblers also made of porcelain in a red leather case.'

'784 - A casket with Chinese varnish, holding twelve porcelain bottles, six large and six small.'11 This casket is no doubt Japanese instead; such Japanese objects were in circulation rather early on in Europe. At the time, it was the word 'China' that was used for anything that came from the Far East, a practice that the President Robien also main-

The blue-and-white porcelain of China had long been familiar to Europeans, exported by sea or via the caravans of the Silk Road, and European ceramicists imitated their designs as they did not master faience at that time.

Thus it was European blue-and-white porcelain tiles that were to decorate the Trianon, the wooden pavilions built in 1670 in the park of Versailles. They served as a retreat for Louis XIV and Madame de Montespan (1640-1707). Note that their oldest son, the Duke of Maine Louis-Auguste de Bourbon (1670–1736), was present during the visit from the ambassadors of Siam in 1686, who visited the porcelain Trianon before it was destroyed the following year, in 1687. The Duke of Maine, for his part, soon became a great enthusiast of chinoiseries. It should come as no surprise that in his library there were

many books on the ambassadors of Siam, and the President Robien also had several. 12 Furthermore, the Duke of Maine was the first commissioner in 1690 of the series of tapestries of Beauvais. Histoire de l'empereur de Chine, which were an immense success in the early eighteenth century.

Louis XIV dreamed of developing the French comptoir (trading post) in Siam, installed since 1658, and of Christianising the country; he thought that in this way there would be a possibility to trade with China. This project resulted in visits from ambassadors who made a great impression in France. Nevertheless, it was a failure, because in the end the only Europeans authorised to maintain a trading post there were the Dutch of the VOC, who did not push religious proselytism.

While the first boat coming from Siam was shipwrecked in 1682, doubtless off the coast of Madagascar, a second arrived in France in 1684 and a third in 1686. The list of gifts provided by the two envoys from Siam in 1684 is not known in its entirety, but we do know that the Grand Dauphin (1661-1711) received porcelain works from China at the time, more numerous than the ones that he received again in 1686, according to the inventory of his cabinet in Versailles compiled in 1689.13 The 1684 ambassador went away with magnificent gifts from Louis XIV, notably some mirrors for the King

Prior to being received with great pomp in Versailles, the last ambassador from Siam to Louis XIV landed in Brest in 1686 and, while he did not come to Rennes, he followed an itinerary via Quimper (the house where the travellers stopped over is still indicated near the cathedral) and the south of Brittany to reach Nantes and the Parisian region via the Loire. A list of gifts from this ambassador to the king, to his son Louis the Grand Dauphin and his daughterin-law Marie-Anne de Bavière (1660-1690), to his grandchildren as well as to Jean-Baptiste Antoine Colbert (1651-1690), Marquis de Seignelay, minister of the Marine and son of Colbert, was swiftly published, and was republished for the Exposition Universelle of 1878 in Paris and in the early twen-

tieth century.14 It is rich in Chinese porcelain and Japanese Jacquerwork - the country's name was correctly noted here, since the French staff present in Siam had known the origin of the works. Even boats laden with cargo were expected, surely Chinese (since the Dutch were rivals), which were to deliver the lacquerwork specially commissioned from Japan, namely some cabinets destined for Louis XIV and whose interiors were decorated with fleur-de-lis.15

However, we do know that other gifts were chosen in the warehouses of the King of Siam who paid 'in kind' the customs duties applied to the ships arriving in his ports, notably those of the Dutch of the VOC. It is highly likely that it was in these warehouses that the large black-and-gold lacquerwork cabinet with a background in red wood with transparent varnish was found, now conserved at the Musée des beaux-arts de Dijon and decorated on one side with a view of the Dutch trading post of Deshima

Did they also find the box bearing, on the inside of the lid, the name of Maria van Diemen (circa 1625-1674), the wife of a former director of the VOC in Batavia, now at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London? Before belonging to the Marquise de Pompadour (1721-1764), to Pierre Louis Randon de Boisset (1708-1776), to the Dukes of Bouillon, then to William Beckford who acquired it in Paris in 1802, this famous box is described in the inventory of assets of the Duchess of Maine, Louise Bénédicte de Bourbon (1676-1753), after her death in 1753 at the Hôtel Biron (now the Musée Rodin). Of course, it is not expressly described in the published list of the gifts from the ambassador of Siam, but this list does not contain the gifts that the missionaries and diplomats accompanying the ambassadors distributed.

However, we do find, besides the vast quantities of Chinese porcelain, over two hundred large or small objects in Japanese lacquerwork. Some are identifiable: we can cite, at the Musée du Louvre, the two black and gilt lacquerwork cabinets of the Grand

Dauphin, derived from his castle in Meudon and not sold during the Revolution, unlike the furniture of Versailles; or, in the Wallace Collection of London, two lapanese cabinets, like the above-mentioned one in Dijon, which were included in one of the fabulous sales of the collection of the Duchess of Montebello, Louise Antoinette Guéhéneuc (1782-1856), in 1857. There was also, now conserved at the Prado Museum in Madrid, a 'coffee' set in red lacquerwork comprising a square tray, four cups, four saucers, and a jug (the latter five pieces in fine golden mounting made in France) that Philip V of Spain (1683–1746), the youngest son of the Grand Dauphin, had inherited. 16,17

It was said at the time that some of the gifts of this ambassador of Siam - of which there were many - had been distributed through lotteries to the members of the court of Louis XIV. Thus, among the many bandèges given away (large concave trays in black and gilt lacquerwork), some may have been found at the Duke of Bourbon's residence and later at his grandson's, the Prince of Condé, before their confiscation during the Revolution. Two of the above-mentioned items, deriving from the collection of the Prince of Condé and which were not claimed in 1816, remaining at the Musée du Louvre, have been conserved since 1945 at the Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet.

The collection of three hundred and eighty porcelain pieces belonging to Louis of France, the Grand Dauphin, begun in 1681 when he was only twenty, and notably enhanced by gifts from Siam, was sold after his death in 1711 'according to his last wishes', as indicated by the catalogue of sale of the great collector that was the Duke of Tallard in 1756... or to pay his debts. The Duke of Tallard, Marie Joseph d'Hostun (1684-1755) owned many blue-and-white porcelain pieces of this provenance, notably furnishings, generally adorned with a gilded bronze mounting, whereas what seems to constitute a table set in Japanese porcelain clearly did not have any mounting, since it was not used for decorative purposes. Among the

<sup>11</sup> YOSHIDA, 2004, note 4, between no. 77 and no. 818.

**<sup>12</sup>** FRÈCHES, 1974.

**<sup>13</sup>** WATSON, 1991

<sup>14</sup> ÉTIENNE-GALLOIS, 1879 and BELEVITCH, 1910.

<sup>15</sup> Their current location is unknown and some of the fragments of lacquerwork featuring the fleur-de-lis have unfortunately not been found.

<sup>16</sup> KAWAMURA, 201217 KAWAMURA, 2012.

**<sup>17</sup>** IMPEY, 2005, pp. 351-353.

FIG.107 Lid of an Imari Vase, Arita, Japan, ca. 1700; porcelain, 24 x 21 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.738).

art lovers who hurried along to this sale in 1711 was the Paris-based ambassador of Augustus II the Strong (1670-1733), Charles-Henry, Count of Hoym (1694-1736), who made purchases for the Dresden collections. We may ponder whether the Grand Dauphin's collection did not already contain, besides the Chinese porcelain, Japanese pieces that had arrived after the inventory of 1689 (still conserved). The Dutch had in fact decided to encourage the Japanese to produce export porcelain destined for Europe, to compensate for China's decline in this field after the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The registers of the VOC in Batavia, studied for the years 1662 to 1684, note direct exportation of over three million porcelain pieces during this period, while others arrived in Batavia via other ports of Southeast Asia and China. There was also the private trading by members of the VOC, which was to continue to a lesser extent until at least 1736.18 This mainly concerned smaller crockery, but there were also subsequently pieces of large size. The Imari lidded fluted, with a rich polychrome design, made in Arita in the province of Hizen and sent from the Port of Imari in the Kyushu to the Port of Nagazaki, a bit further south, were a big success and several remarkable examples were found in the President Robien's collection; as well as in that of Augustus II the Strong in Dresden; at Burghley House, the sprawling mansion of John Cecil 5th Duke of Exeter (1648-1699) in England, also endowed with Japanese lacquerwork; and in many other aristocratic European palaces, including in the Scandinavian countries that also had, at various times, their own companies travelling as far as China.

For France, we can cite the collection found at the Hôtel Matignon, the Parisian residence of the very wealthy Duchess of Galliera, Maria Brignole Sale De Ferrari (1811–1888), a collection that she decided eventually, in 1884, to bequeath to the city of Genoa. It is currently on display at the Palazzo Rosso. One lidded pot and two fluted vases have a very similar design, with the screen motif and with that of the four pieces conserved from President Robien's upholstery, whereas the button on the lid

is a similar shape to that of an 'orphan' lid in Rennes (FIG.107) and allows us to imagine what some of the lost pots may have looked like.

At Rohan Castle, an administrative residence of the bishops of Strasbourg, the Musée des arts décoratifs de Strasbourg conserves the revolutionary confiscation of the Cardinal of Rohan's collection (1734–1803), the third of his name and the unfortunate hero of the affair of the gueen's necklace. In the storage area of Rohan Castle, under reconstruction after a fire in 1770, where it had been temporarily placed while awaiting the end of the renovations, a report of new objects compiled in 1784 mentions 'twenty-nine vases of different sizes from Japan, two large bagottes (cases) from Japan' - which were in fact the two porcelain Nanjing Towers from China. A complete set of Imari upholstery was also found there, very similar to that of President Robien. Unlike the recent acquisitions, these were doubtless objects taken from a Parisian hôtel belonging to the Rohan family and collected in the early eighteenth century. Two small lacquer cabinets were also found there, of equivalent format to that of the three cabinets in Rennes, with four hinges on the doors. This format also applied to the lacquerwork cabinet visible on the famous 1740 etching by François Boucher (1703-1770) for the publicity of the dealer Edme François Gersaint (1694-1750), who frequented President Robien in

Some of the lacquerwork cabinets, serving as coin display cabinets at the Bavarian State Mint in Munich, arrived in France circa 1700; they are generally larger than the ones in Rennes, with five hinges on each door. They show how tempting it was to transform these solid pieces of furniture by removing the drawers and replacing them with compartments especially designed for coins and medals.<sup>19</sup>

The Imari porcelain and lacquerwork cabinets from Japan, arriving in Amsterdam in the second half of the seventeenth century, were distributed all across Europe. For France, besides the Parisian market, we must think of the role of the active port of Saint-Malo, closer to Rennes, from where



**<sup>19</sup>** SCHWEIZER, 201120 LESPAGNOL, 2011.



FIG.108 Tub, Japan, first half of the 17th century: lacquered wood with fish design. 9.3 x 36.2 x 2.4 cm; the Robien Collection. Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794 1 695)

the ships would stock up on supplies directly in the United Provinces during peacetime, notably in the late seventeenth century. The 'messieurs de Saint-Malo' made their fortunes by sending their ships, not only along the coasts of the North Sea or the Mediterranean, but as far as the Pacific Coast of South America, the Philippines, and even China 20

Indeed, their ships carried textiles for Spanish America and loaded up in Peru with the silver highly coveted by the Chinese that was then delivered to the other side of the Pacific. On their way back, they filled their cargo holds with luxury goods, of which porcelain was certainly only a modest part, but was nevertheless present. This trade was to decline from 1740 onwards.

The ships from Saint-Malo reached Canton from 1703 and Amoy from 1709, and they regularly travelled to China until 1720. They were present on all fronts and destabilised the monopolies of the official companies. There was even a Compagnie des Indes de Saint-Malo, founded in 1701 and active until 1719, which had a large degree of autonomy under the control of traders, including Hyacinthe de Chappedelaine. We know that his brother Florian, known as La Falaise, served as an intermediary for a pre-Columbian ceramic work from Robien's collection (FIG.90).

The voyage of the first French ship to have toured the world, Le grand Dauphin, is known through the handwritten account of the sailor Desbois:21 having left Saint-Malo for the South Seas for the purposes of trade on 15 January 1711, and returning safely on 29 July 1713, it went via Gorée Island in Africa, the Strait of Magellan, Valparaiso, and Peru, reaching Canton where it stayed for several months due to lack of wind, then went on to Macao where it raised the English flag as a precautionary measure, followed by the Cape of Good Hope. It is a shame, however, that during his stay in Canton, Desbois, who provided information about Chinese customs, only spoke of 'merchandise' without further detail.

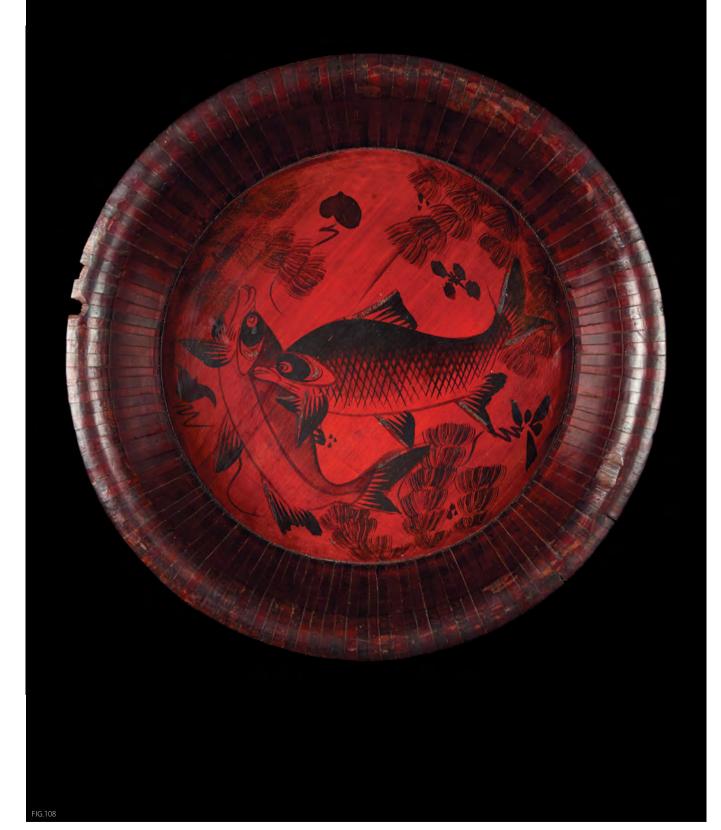
These Japanese or Chinese goods, coming from

China, could also be found in Mexico where the Spanish brought them as far as Acapulco or even in Cadix, a city with which the Séré family living in Saint-Malo traded, and where, on her mother's side, the young wife of President Robien came from, Julienne de Robien-Kerambourg (1716-1742).

At this time, the traders of Saint-Malo were not just dealing regularly with Amsterdam, but also Ostend where an ephemeral private Austrian company had its headquarters, dissolved in 1731 - the one that must have imported from China some or all of the Japanese lacquerwork that the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria (1717-1780) was collecting, and that she gave to her daughter the Queen Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793) in 1780. This famous collection left Versailles in 1789 to lie dormant at the marchand-merciers Daguerre and Lignereux; the latter brought it to the Louvre in 1794 where it was eventually decided it should be kept. Today, it is divided among the collections of the Musée du Louvre, the Château de Versailles, and the Musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the Emperor of China had Japanese lacquerwork of the same kind (now conserved at the Forbidden City in Beijing and in Taipei).

Naturally, the Compagnie française des Indes orientales, whose ships were arriving in Lorient and whose commodities were sold in Nantes, could bring back porcelain pieces of the green variety from China or Chinese Imari; since the kilns of Jingdezhen, once again in activity, imitated the polychrome designs of the Imari porcelain that were then in vogue. Antique dealers from Vannes or Rennes still offer copies similar to those of President Robien, thus attesting to their abundance on the Breton market in the eighteenth century.

Nevertheless, certain rarities from the collection no doubt came to Rennes thanks to the ships from Saint-Malo, such as the shield (FIG.110) whose interior is in nanban style, the sabre (FIG.109), which most likely left Japan before the closure of the country in 1640, or the tub decorated with a large fish (FIG.108), whose shape is Japanese, but which is less luxurious in its technique than the Japanese tubs



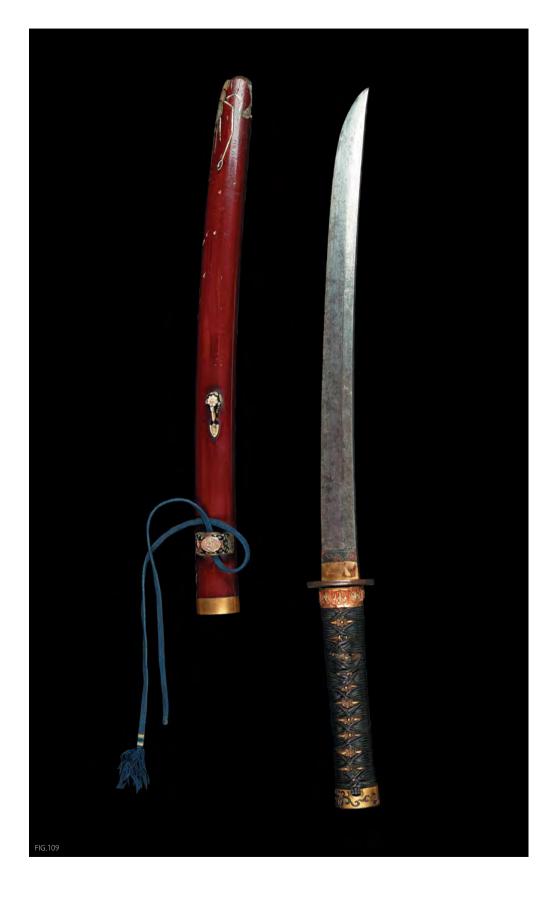
**<sup>20</sup>** LESPAGNOL, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> LE MOTHEU 2009

**<sup>22</sup>** KOPPLIN, 2002.

ALISÉE DES BEALIX A DES DE DENINES . LANAVIED 2021

FIG.109 Wakizashi and its sheath, Japan, first half of the 17th century; lacquered wood, leather, mother-of-pearl, metal, and plant fibres, 57.4 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.764).



made of black and gilt lacquerwork at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence or the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris. The latter was confiscated in 1807 in Cassel by Denon, in the palace of the prince-electors of Hesse-Cassel.<sup>23</sup>

We can also note two silk perfume or Chinese incense purses (FIG.108), which were mistaken for Japanese tobacco pouches. The latter (of which there exist nineteenth-century examples in leather in the same shape at the Tobacco and Salt Museum of Tokyo) have a cord onto which a netsuke (a small sculpture pierced with two holes) is threaded to attach them to the belt of a male garment. The ones belonging to President Robien have typically Chinese cords.<sup>24</sup> They can only have come from a Chinese port, and I think that they may have made their way to Europe on a ship returning to Saint-Malo. As for President Robien's largest lacquerwork cabinet (FIG.112), it is a Japanese piece of furniture that may have been a gift from a converted daimyo to a Spanish or Portuguese missionary returning from Japan.

Therefore, unlike some of the lacquerwork of the royal collections, outmoded, relegated to the furniture depositories of the Crown, and sold at auction under Louis XV (1710–1774), in 1741, 1751, and 1752, 25 the collections from Rennes, confiscated during the Revolution, inform us as to the taste of a family of parliamentarians in Rennes during the Age of Enlightenment. But it is highly likely that it will never be possible to affirm with a degree of certainty what the pathway of these objects was, from the Far East to the *hôtel particulier* on Rue aux Foulons in Rennes.

**<sup>23</sup>** LACAMBRE, 2010, no. 11, repr.

<sup>24</sup> LEFEBVRE, 2018, nos. 87 and 88, repr. Mr. Shi Yuan, deputy director of the Shanghai Museum has confirmed that the purses from Rennes are indeed Chinese

<sup>25</sup> CASTELLUCCIO, 2009.

### SHIELD FIG.110

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013; Jean-Pierre Reverseau, Musée national des Invalides, Musée de l'Armée, Paris, 2004 (Persian? seventeenth century).

### **Bibliography**

BANÉAT, 1932, p. 139, no. 8491 (China); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 445, no. 4689; ANDRÉ, 1876, pp. 458–59, no. 1568 (China); ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 283–83, no. 834.

### **Exhibitions**

Collectors of Souls. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collection in Breton Museums, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 06.12.06–03.03.07; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72–08.72 (no catalogue).

The archives of the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC) indicate that thirty-six shields to be lacquered in Japan were sent from Bengal to Batavia (now Jakarta). Although Portuguese trade archives are unavailable, it is likely that the VOC only took over the practice when the Portuguese, banned from Japan, were forced to abandon it. Prepared in the East Indies and covered in rhinoceros skin, these shields, lacquered in Japan, were for the most part sent back again to the East Indies. Eleven round shields have been listed in museums and castles of northern Europe, dating from the second half of the seventeenth century.2 Often bearing the coat of arms of members of the VOC, they were only decorative<sup>3</sup> and their interior surfaces were simply lacquered in black. The one conserved in Pillnitz Castle is from the collection of Auguste le Fort (1670-1733), and has a more luxurious interior surface of aventurine lacquer (nashiji).4

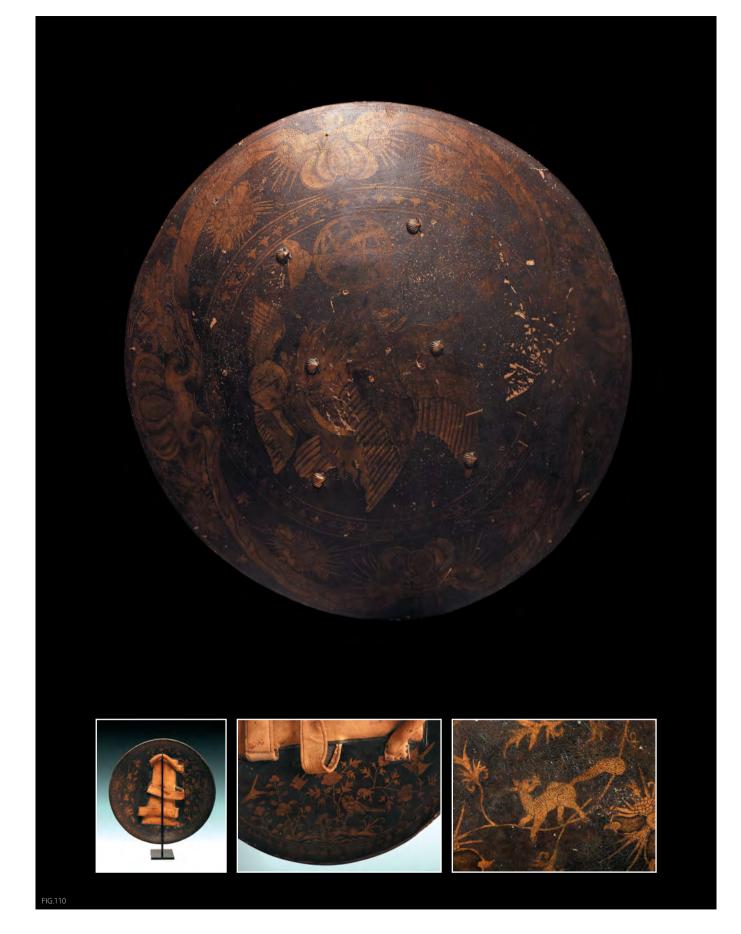
The shield from Rennes, previously listed as Chinese in origin, boasts a decoration on the reverse side of plants with birds and squirrels, in the same style as the interior surface of a shield held by the Musée de l'Armée in Paris (I 84). They both have a device in leather that allows them to be used: the Musée de l'Armée suggests it was used as a 'round *carrousel* shield'. The piece bears the number 386 in the 1775 *Inventaire du mobilier de la Couronne*, with no precise origin: 'A round

shield of wood with a painted cluster of flowers and small branches in gold around the edge, the middle is a coat of arms in black with a gules cross potent topped with a helmet surrounded in mantling.' There is no decoration on the other side. It is mentioned in the État de l'an II (1793), then in that of I'an V (1797). Conserved since the French Revolution at the Bibliothèque nationale of France, it was transferred to the Musée de l'Armée in 1861.5 Although the reason for its entry into the Crown collection remains unknown, Jean-Pierre Reverseau compares the shield to one conserved at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, 6 which bears light plant and flower motifs on the exterior face, presented as they are here on a black background, or again with the one from Pillnitz, which bears some elements indicating the Netherlands. Each side of the Rennes shield displays a circular frieze of stylised three-pointed leaves, which is quite close to the exterior decorations on the shield of the Musée de l'Armée.

The style of the interior surfaces of these shields is still, it seems, in the spirit of the first half of the seventeenth century, notably for the sparse motifs found on the back sides of *nanban* pieces or from the collection of Mazarin (1602–1661). It could also be compared, as Yayo Kawamura suggests, to that of a parasol (Ø 127 cm) in bamboo, silk, black lacquer, and golden *kindei* paint (water, glue, gold powder), said to have belonged to 'Saint François-Xavier', formerly in the Church of the Gesù in Rome, and given in 1976 to the 26 Martyrs Museum in Nagasaki; this parasol could have been made in Macao, the Portuguese trading post in China, or in Manila, in imitation of Japanese technique.

The shield from Rennes, in a Japanese style on a support prepared in the East Indies, is decorated on the exterior face with mysterious armorial bearings, an armillary sphere, a sun and a phoenix escaping from fire, all coming out of a winged ball that may refer to the Portuguese world, perhaps to the state of Rio de Janeiro (which contains similar elements in its coat of arms). Remember that René Duguay-Trouin (1673–1736), from Saint Malo, won a decisive battle in Rio de Janeiro in 1711 during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714) and that his ships carried the impressive spoils of his adventures. Perhaps this shield was part of those treasures?

**FIG.110** Shield, Bengal and Japan, early 17th century (for the interior face); wood covered in leather, black and gilt lacquer on the inner side, black and gilt paint (?) on the external side, handle in leather held by metal rivets with heads in the form of shells,  $10.4 \times \varnothing$  55 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.705).



<sup>1</sup> IMPEY, 2005, p. 252.

<sup>2</sup> SUCHOMEL, 2002, nos. 25 and 38.

**<sup>3</sup>** IMPEY, 2005, figs. 42 to 45.

<sup>4</sup> IMPEY, 2005, fig. 603.

**<sup>5</sup>** REVERSEAU, 2004, p. 242, repr. and p. 317.

**<sup>6</sup>** IMPEY, 2005, fig. 37, p. 45.

### **NAMBAN CABINET FIG.112**

### Restoration

Centre régional de restauration et de conservation des œuvres d'art, Vesoul, 2003

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih. National Taiwan University. Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013 (nanban style, 1620-1640); Jun'Ichi Uchiyama, Sendai City Museum, Sendai, 1997 (uroko-mon, seventeenth century).

### **Bibliography**

FALAISE, 2020, p. 31; MOCELLIN, 2013, p. 13; LACAMBRE, 2010, p. 51; COULON, 2006, p. 73; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 141, no. 8622 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 451, no. 4767; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 471, no. 1645 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 293-94, no.

### **Exhibitions**

L'Europe des merveilles au temps de la curiosité, Musée de Saint-Antoine-l'Abbaye, 07.07.13-06.10.13; L'or du Japon. Laques anciens des collections publiques françaises, Bourg-en-Bresse, Royal Monastery of Brou, 02.05.10-25.07.10; Collecteurs d'âmes. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collections in Breton Museums, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 06.12.06-03.03.07; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

The archives of the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC) indicate that cabinets with drawers and two doors, covered with ray skin and lacquered, were exported in 1635. The cabinet in this style in the collection in Rennes, which has exceptional decorations evoking coats of arms (mon) in triangles on its top and the exterior of the doors, could even date from prior to this and have made its way to Rennes by a route other than the United Provinces. The interior layout, with a drawer decorated with an arcature in the centre, is still in the *nanban* tradition of the early seventeenth century. It may have been produced for a Japanese patron who then gifted it to a foreigner, perhaps a missionary.

In the Lisbon collection of F. H. Raposo, there is a small cabinet, from the early Edo period, also covered in ray skin, with a fall-front door deco-



rated on the inside with a lozenge-shaped cartouche of black lacquer and golden branches; the other cartouches are poly-lobed.1 Lozengeshaped cartouches (some of which are on ray skin) can also be found, for example, on a large nanban-style chest conserved in Cologne.<sup>2</sup> This was a style employed in the early seventeenth century in Japan, for example for cases with drawers and one door, like the one taken from Cassel in 1806 and placed in storage at the Musées d'Art et d'Histoire in La Rochelle by the National Marine Museum.<sup>3</sup>

On the cabinet from Rennes, the plant decorations on the drawer lozenges, the cartouches on the sides, and the fan on the back are of a remarkable quality, in the Kodai-ji style that developed in Kyoto in the early seventeenth century. Several fan motifs can be found on chests, in particular no. 835 described in the Mazarin inventory of 1661.4

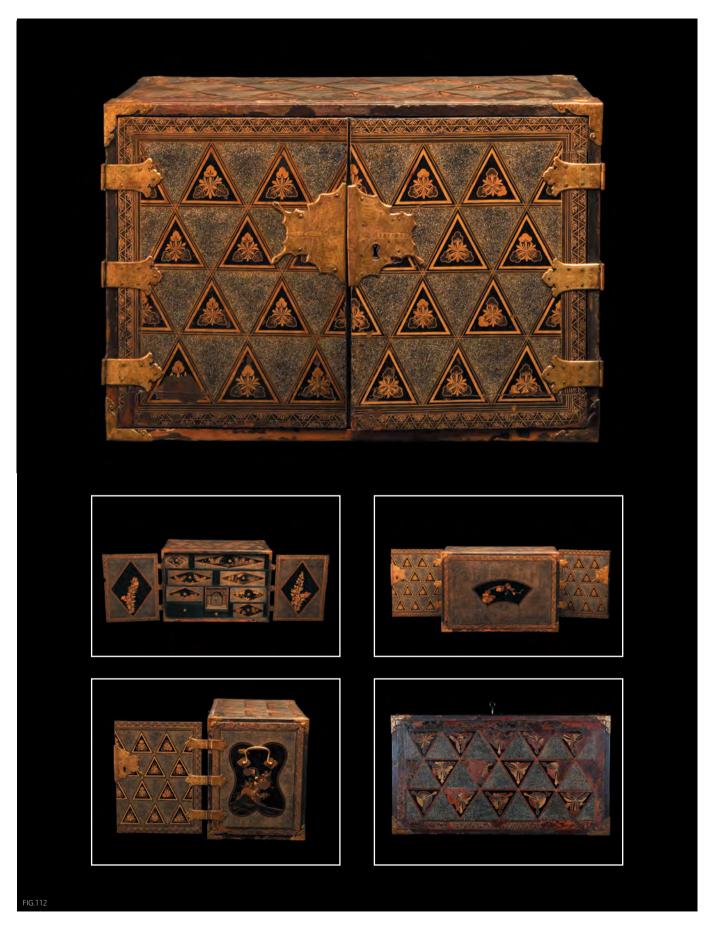
Transformed into a coin cabinet for Robien (in 1742, Antoine Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville (1680-1765) remarked on Robien's coin collection that was stored in five coin cabinets), this cabinet had some of its drawers haphazardly returned in the nineteenth century. The upperleft drawer should be in the centre of the lower row and the lower-right drawer should be at the 4 YOSHIDA, 2004, p. 162.

FIG.111 Chest, Japan, 1601-1615, European hinges; lacquered wood, 22.5 x 35.5 x 19 cm; former collection of the Dukes of Bavaria, Landshut Burg Trausnitz (L 2003/1258), stored at the Museum fünf Kontinente (26-N-21).

FIG.112 Nanban cabinet, Japan, ca. 1620-1630, drawers replaced in the 19th century; wood and ray skin, black and gilt lacquer, inlaid with copper, 43 x 62 x 34 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.753).

left of the upper row. The compartments that were recreated are too thick and are attached with two boards needlessly added at the top and the bottom. Several of the small drawers have been lost, two or four would undoubtedly have surrounded the central arched compartment, and a narrower fifth drawer would have been at the same level as the two medium-sized drawers above. The longer of the drawers and the one positioned at the lower-right seem to have been shortened on their vertical sides. All are currently held in place at the back by wedges, but these may also have existed in the original.

- 1 MENDES PINTO, 1990, p. 92, repr.
- 2 SHONO-SLADEK, 1994, no. 309, repr.
- 3 LAHAYE, 2011, no. 1, repr.



# LIDDED VASE, IMARI STYLE

GENEVIÈVE LACAMBRE

### LIDDED VASE FIG.113

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### **Bibliography**

FRÈCHES, 1974; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, no. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 450, no. 4749 repr. h. t., face pp. 450-451; ANDRÉ, 1876, pp. 468-469, no. 1630 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 201-202, no. 886.

### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

Against a blue background of golden chrysanthemums, kidney-shaped cartouches on the lid and belly, containing on one side a couple under a tree to the right of a water landscape and mountains with a pagoda and on the other side, a construction in a landscape of the same type. A design of branches in bloom, also on a white background, is deployed on long rectangles and sometimes flexibly folded back onto itself, evoking the strips of paper used to write or paint poems in calligraphy.

This kind of design on a blue background with golden flowers is frequent; it is found on complete sets. One, in Dresden (Grünes Gewölbe, PO 5801, 5813, 5069, 5808, 5143), was acquired for Augustus II the Strong (1670-1733) in 1723 from Madame Bassetouche. This patronym appears to be Breton: could this set have been transported on a ship belonging to the French East India Company from Canton? Another at the Ashmolean Museum d'Oxford (EA 2012), dated 1700-1720, comes from Althorp (Northamptonshire), in the Spencer family castle. The Musée des arts décoratifs de Strasbourg conserves a vase that is not as big, of the same variety, but that has lost its lid. It derives from the collection of the Cardinal de Rohan (1734-1803).1

The design is also found on the narrower baluster-vase, such as the set of five vases conserved in Dunham Massey (Cheshire), at the residence of George Booth (1675–1758), who had married the daughter of a rich merchant from the EIC in 1702.<sup>2</sup> The 1910 bequest of George Salting

(1836–1909) to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London contained many in this style, notably a set of five vases (C1511-1910). It is not necessary to evoke Amsterdam as the source of supply in Europe. This porcelain could also have been brought to Canton by Chinese junks.

**FIG.113** Lidded vase, Imari style, Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province, ca. 1700; porcelain with blue design under lid, red and gilt enamel, 51 x Ø 36 cm (jar), 18.2 x Ø 23.2 cm (lid), 69.2 cm in total; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.741).



<sup>1</sup> MARTIN, 2008.

**<sup>2</sup>** FERGUSON, 2016, pp. 42–43, repr.

# GLAZED VASES, IMARI STYLE

GENEVIÈVE LACAMBRE

### GLAZED VASES FIG.114

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### **Bibliography**

FRÈCHES, 1974; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 450, nos. 4741-42, repr. h. t., frontal view, pp. 450-451; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 468, nos. 1622-23 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 291, nos. 878-79.

### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue)

### FLUTED GLAZED VASES. IMARI STYLE FIG.115

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### Bibliography

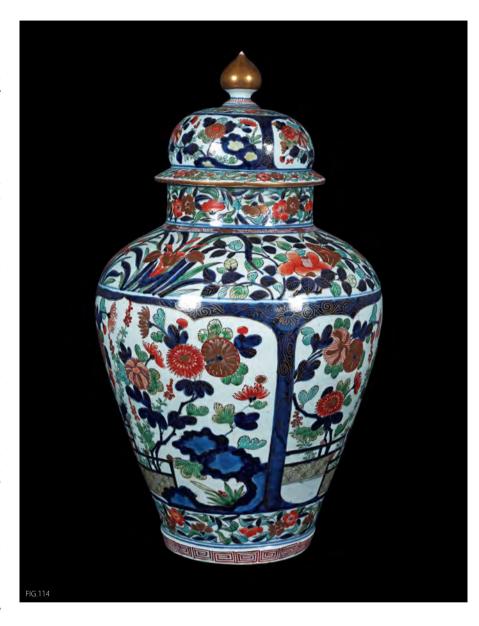
FRÈCHES, 1974; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 450, nos. 4747-48; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 468, nos. 1628-29 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 291, nos. 884-85.

### **Exhibition:**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue)

On these two examples of styles of vases, the decoration is divided into three zones: the neck, the upper belly (sometimes separated by a line), and the lower part in an enveloping floral motif in large white sections ringed with blue.

The two fluted vases have round porcelain pastilles, placed before firing and flattening the surface where the flowers are. This is a common type and similar examples, without fluting, are conserved in Japanese museums in Dresden, Burghley House in Stamford (Lincolnshire), at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (C1162-1917), and at the Musée des arts décoratifs in Strasbourg (from the Cardinal de Rohan collection (1734–1803).



**FIG.114** Lidded vase, Imari style, Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province, ca. 1700; porcelain with polychrome and gilt decorations,  $52.2 \times \emptyset$  40 cm (vase),  $16.2 \times \emptyset$  24 cm (lid), 67.5 cm in total; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.736-¹ and -²), stored in 2006 at the Musée de la Compagnie des Indes, Lorient (D.794.1.736-¹ and ²).

**FIG.115** Lidded fluted vase, Imari style, Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province, ca. 1680–1700; porcelain with blue underglaze, polychrome and gilt,  $36 \times \varnothing$  28 cm (vase),  $14.5 \times \varnothing$  18 cm (lid), 50 cm in total; the Robien Collection, Musée des beauxarts de Rennes, stored in 2006 at the Musée de la Compagnie des Indes, Lorient (D.794.1.740-¹ and ²).

1 MARTIN, 2008.



MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD - ASIA IN ROBIEN'S DAY - Geneviève Lacambre 249

MALISÉE DES BEALIX. A BTS DE BENNES : LANVIER

# **ROUND DISH**

GENEVIÈVE LACAMBRE

### **DISH** FIG.116

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### Bibliography

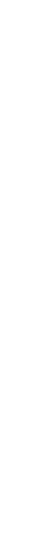
FRÈCHES, 1974; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 138, nos. 8373-77 (Chine); ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 456, no. 1555 (China); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 280, no. 822.

### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue)

This is no doubt one of the Chinese porcelains that Robien considered antiquities. Owing to the arrangement of its design, particularly the cartouches on the rim and its coloured enamels - rust red, green, turquoise - this shallow dish is similar to the one conserved at the Boiimans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam<sup>1</sup> (A 8843), which has virtually the same dimensions. According to a characteristic of the rapid work of the potters of this region in the south of China, the bottom of this dish bears brown traces of the sand from the kilns. Sinuous lines in red decorate the underside of the dish, one of which has a green lozenge in relief - the same type of enamel relief that can be observed on the front side and that highlights the framings of the cartouches, or the birds in flight at its centre. Since this efficiently decorated production spread through Southeast Asia and Japan, some designs, such the red geometric networks of the border, were reused by the potters of these countries or in latter-day porcelain works of the 'green family'.

FIG.116 Dish, China, Zhangzhou kilns, Fujian province, aka Swatow, ca. 1600–1630; polychrome porcelain, rust red, green, turquoise blue, 9 x Ø 42 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.685).





**1** JÖRG, 2011, no. 2, repr.

# ROUND PLATE, IMARI STYLE

GENEVIÈVE LACAMBRE

### ROUND PLATE. IMARI STYLE

China, Jingdezhen kilns, Jiangxi province Circa 1720. Porcelain with blue, red, and gilt decorations, h.  $5.3 \times \emptyset$  47 cm. Inventory: 794.1.744

### Restoration

Natacha Frenkel, 2019

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### **Bibliography**

FALAISE, 2020, p. 38; FRÈCHES, 1974; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 450, no. 4753; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 469, no. 1634 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 292, no. 890.

### **Exhibitions**

Collectors of Souls. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collections in Breton Museums, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 06.12.06-03.03.07; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

### **ROUND PLATE, IMARI STYLE** FIG.118

### Restoration

Juliette Vignier-Dupin, 2005

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### Bibliography

FRÈCHES, 1974; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 450, no. 4756; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 469, no. 1637 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 292, no. 893.

### **Exhibitions**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue)

# CUP OR LARGE DEEP BOWL, IMARI STYLE FIG.117

### Restoration

Natacha Frenkel, 2019

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### Bibliography

FRÈCHES, 1974; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 451, no. 4760; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 469, no. 1638 (Japan); ANDRÈ, 1868, p. 292, no. 894.

### Exhibitions

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue)

### **CUP OR LARGE DEEP BOWL, IMARI STYLE**

China, Jingdezhen kilns, Jiangxi province Circa 1720. Porcelain with blue, red, and gilt decorations, h. 14 x Ø 31.1 cm. Inventory: 794.1.748

### Restoration

Natacha Frenkel, 2019

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### **BBibliography**

FRÈCHES, 1974; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 451, no. 4761; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 469, no. 1639 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 292, no. 895.

### **Exhibitions**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72–08.72 (no catalogue)

Most likely forming part of a dinner set, these Chinese porcelain pieces must have arrived in Brittany in a shipment from the Compagnie française des Indes orientales. Only one of the two plates in Rennes carries the blue underglaze Chinese mark, listed as being a magical mushroom.



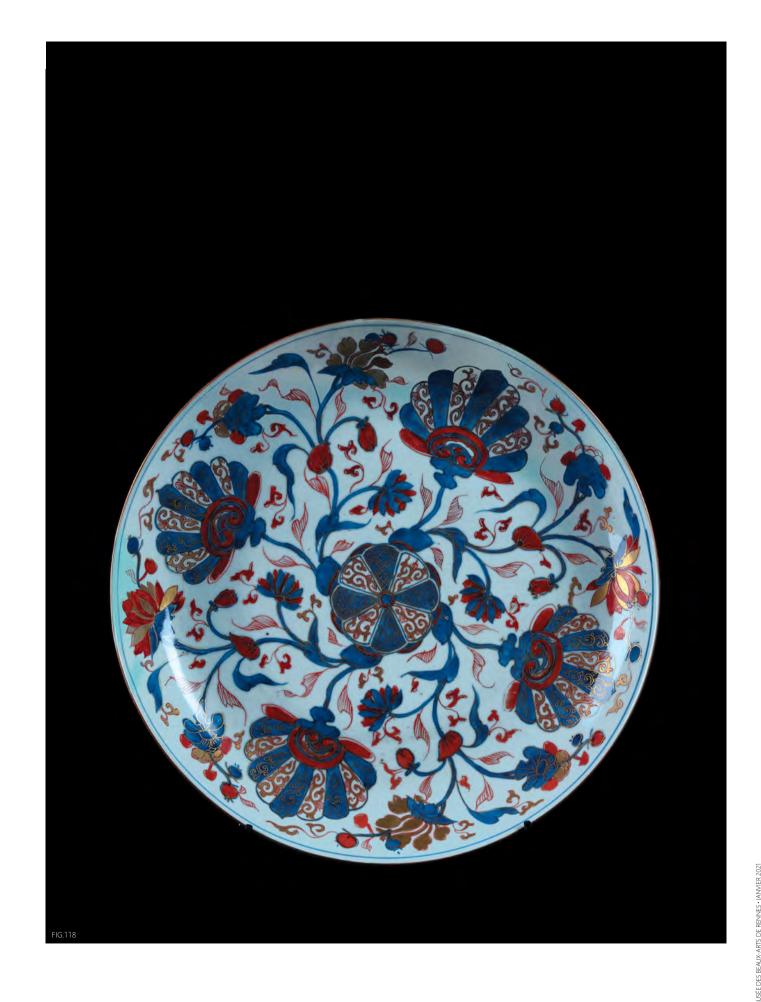
**FIG.117** Cup or large deep bowl, Imari style, China, Jingdezhen kilns, Jiangxi province, ca. 1720; porcelain with blue, red, and gilt decorations,  $14 \times \emptyset$  31 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.747).

FIG.118 Round plate, Imari style, China, Jingdezhen kilns, Jiangxi province, ca. 1720; porcelain with blue, red, and gilt decorations, 5.8 x Ø 38.8 cm; label in lower centre: *Lingzhi* or sacred mushroom; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794 1.746)

We do know, through a document conserved at the Archives de Nantes, that the *Saint-Louis* returned to Saint Malo on 20 September 1726 with '4,470 porcelain dishes of different colours and sizes', which were sold in Nantes. This is only one example of such a shipment.

The large round plate 794.1.744 has two polylobe motifs enclosing flowers on the rim, which are found on the large dishes at the Cité de la céramique à Sèvres (MNC 1201.9, Ø 56 cm and MNC 1201.2, Ø 39 cm), which come from the royal collections. It should be noted that a plate of a similar style exists in the Augustus II the Strong (1670–1733) Collections in Dresden.





JSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE RENNES•JAN

### **MOBILE CABINET WITH TWO DOORS DECORATED WITH A LANDSCAPE AND** BRIDGE FIGS.119 and 120

### Restoration

Centre régional de restauration et de conservation des œuvres d'art, Vesoul, 1996

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### Bibliography

PETOUT, 1977, p. 63, no. 187; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 141, no. 8623 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 451, no. 4768; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 471, no. 1646 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 294, no. 902.

### **Exhibition**

Exotisme et voyageurs, Saint Malo, Musée d'histoire, 07.77-10.77

### MOBILE CABINET WITH TWO DOORS **DECORATED WITH A LANDSCAPE AND BRIDGE** FIG.121

### Restoration:

Centre régional de restauration et de conservation des œuvres d'art, Vesoul, 1996

### **Observations:**

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### **Bibliography**

FORAY-CARLIER, 2014, pp. 25-26, no. 4; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 141, no. 8624 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 451, no. 4769; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 471, no. 1647 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 294, no. 903.

### **Exhibitions**

Les secrets de la laque française : le vernis Martin. Paris. Musée des Arts décoratifs. 13.02.14-06.08.14; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).



### MOBILE CABINET WITH TWO DOORS **DECORATED WITH BRANCHES AND** FLOWERS AT THE WATER'S EDGE FIG.122

### Restoration

Centre régional de restauration et de conservation des œuvres d'art, Vesoul, 1996

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### **Bibliography**

LACAMBRE, 2010, p. 86, no. 16; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 141, no. 8625 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 451, no. 4770; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 471, no. 1648 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 294, no. 904.

### **Exhibitions**

L'or du Japon. Laques anciens des collections publiques françaises, Bourg-en-Bresse, Royal Monastery of Brou, 02.05.10-25.07.10; Collecteurs d'âmes. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collections in Breton Museums, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 06.12.06-03.03.07; Permanent exhibition rooms logue) at the Musée de Bretagne, 1974-2006; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

FIGS.119 and 120 Coin cabinet, Japan, ca. 1670-1690; black and gilt lacquered wood, inlaid with gilt copper; interior of the two doors: aventurine lacquer: subsequently converted into a coin cabinet with ten horizontal compartments; top. one Japanese drawer, black and gilt lacquer; below, two red and gilt coin drawers, the others are empty, 36 x 33 5 x 29 8 cm: the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.754), stored at the Musée d'histoire de Saint-Malo from 1964 to 1996.

### **COIN CABINET WITH TWO DOORS FIG.123**

### **Observations**

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### **Bibliography**

BANÉAT, 1932, p. 141, nos. 8622-29 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 452, no. 4771; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 471, no. 1649 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 294-95, no. 904 bis.

### Exhibition

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no cata-





These coin cabinets, one of which was made in Europe, and the nanban cabinet comprise the series of five mentioned in 1742 by Antoine Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville (1680-1765). It was common practice in the early eighteenth century to transform Japanese lacquered cabinets into coin cabinets and adapt them for this new use. The original drawers have been lost, except for two that take up the width of the cabinet, and a fair number of the medallion drawers are also missing.

Through their style and exterior decoration, these three Japanese cabinets are similar to two, slightly larger cabinets designed to be suspended, conserved in the cabinet of curiosities at Kynžvart Castle in Bohemia, which formerly belonged to the Metternich family. Flowers are depicted on one of the doors, and there is a landscape with birds in flight on the other. Like the cabinets in Rennes, the door interiors are in aventurine without any decoration. The metal hinges are also very similar to certain coin cabinets at the Royal Foundry of Munich,1 or those on one of the two cabinets that were put up for sale in Paris at the Hôtel Drouot on 13 November 2013 (no. 7), which came from a castle acquired by Colbert (1619-1683) in 1683 and that remained with his descendants: the cabinets are believed to have arrived in France with the ambassadors of Siam. These few examples, among many others, enable us to establish the fabrication date of the coin cabinets in Rennes to the last third of the seventeenth century.2



FIG.121 Mobile cabinet with two doors decorated with a landscape and bridge, Japan, ca. 1670-1690; black and gilt lacquered wood, inlaid with gilt copper; interior of the two doors: aventurine lacquer; subsequently converted into a coin cabinet with ten horizontal compartments: top, one Japanese drawer, black and gilt lacquer; 35.5 x 33.9 x 29.8 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.755)

FIG.122 Mobile cabinet with two doors decorated with branches and flowers at the water's edge, Japan, ca. 1670-1690; black and gilt lacquered wood, inlaid with gilt copper; interior of the two doors: aventurine lacquer; subsequently converted into a coin cabinet with eleven horizontal compartments and nine coin drawers, 32.4 x 30.5 x 30 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.756).

FIG.123 Coin cabinet with two doors, France and Japan, prior to 1742; wood painted black, metal, 37 x 33 x 30.4 cm; ten compartments with nine red and gold coin drawers, and on the upper row, a Japanese drawer in black and gilt lacquer, from item 794.1.756: the Robien Collection. Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.828).

## PORTABLE CABINET

GENEVIÈVE LACAMBRE



### **PORTABLE CABINET** FIG.124

### Restoration

Centre régional de restauration et de conservation des œuvres d'art, Vesoul, 2012-2016

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013; Kung-Shin Chou, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2011 (Japanese influenced Chinese object?); François Gonse, PhD, Université Paris IV Sorbonne, 1994.

### **Bibliography**

BANÉAT, 1932, p. 141, nos. 8622-29 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 452, no. 4773; ANDRÉ, 1876, pp. 471-472, no. 1651 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 294-295, no. 906.

### **Exhibitions**

Collectors of Souls. From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Extra-European Collections in Breton Museums, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 06.12.06-03.03.07; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

This case is in the shape of a kodansu, or cabinet, for Japanese use, with a door and drawers. Scenes in gilt lacquer in relief (maki-e) are inscribed in kidney-shaped cartouches, a motif that can be found on Imari porcelain for export or on a black-and-gold lacquered kogo (small snuffbox or incense box) at the Herzog Anton-Ulrich Museum in Brunswick.1

FIG.124 Portable cabinet, Japan, ca. 1680-1700; black and gilt lacquered wood, inlaid with gilt copper; interior in aventurine lacquer, 13.7 x 13.5 x 26.9 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.758).

1 DIESINGER, 1990, no. 199, repr. (Chi 847).

<sup>1</sup> SCHWEIZER, 2011, nos. 10 to 14, repr.

<sup>2</sup> SUCHOMEL, 2002, no. 23, repr.

# OVAL DISH WITH FLUTED EDGES, FAMILLE VERTE

GENEVIÈVE LACAMBRE

### **OVAL DISH** FIG.125

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris,

### Bibliography

MÉZIN, 2002, no. 1, p. 28; FRÈCHES, 1974, no. 1, pp. 39–42; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 138, no. 8373-77 (China); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 443, no. 4653; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 456, no. 1553 (China); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 280, no. 820.

### **Exhibitions**

Permanent galleries at the Musée de Bretagne, 1974-2006; Cargaison de Chine, Lorient, Musée de la Compagnie des Indes, 06.02-11.02; Robien l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts. 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).



China, Jingdezhen kilns, Jiangxi province, ca. 1720-1730; porcelain with polychrome decorations and gilt highlights, 8.3 x 36.2 x 27 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.684).

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### **Bibliography**

FRÈCHES, 1974, no. 1, pp. 39-42; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 138, no. 8373-77 (China); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 443, no. 4654; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 456, no. 1554 (China); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 280, no. 821.

### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).



The traditional Chinese pattern of flowers and birds is here treated with the characteristic colours of the famille verte, or green family, which burgeoned under the reign of the Emperor Kangxi (1662-1722), but the presence of the gilt highlights indicates a somewhat later date, no doubt after 1720. The Cité de la céramique de Sèvres has several round dishes with the same type of border, alternating floral cartouches against a white background and geometric lattice, but none of them have this fluted edge and oval shape.

FIG.125 Oval dish with fluted edges, famille verte, China, Jingdezhen kilns, Jiangxi province, ca. 1720-1730; porcelain with polychrome decorations and gilt highlights, 8.3 x 36.2 x 27 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.683), placed in storage in 2006 at the Musée de la Compagnie des Indes. Lorient (D.794.1.683).



# LIDDED FLUTED VASES FRAGMENTS OF A GARNITURE

GENEVIÈVE LACAMBRE

### **IMARI-STYLE OCTAGONAL LIDDED VASES** FIGS.126 and 129

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Talwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### **Bibliography**

FRÈCHES, 1974, no. 1, pp. 39-42; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 449, nos. 4736-37, repr. h. t., face p. 450-451; ANDRÉ, 1876, pp. 467-468, nos. 1617-18 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 290, no. 873-74.

### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72 - 08.72 (no catalogue).

### **IMARI-STYLE FLUTED VASE** FIG.127

### IMARI-STYLE FLUTED VASE

Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province, ca. 1700; polychrome and gold porcelain, 60.8 x Ø 28.7 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.734-1).

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Talwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

Bibliography:

FRÈCHES, 1974, no. 1, pp. 39-42; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 449, nos. 4738-39; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 468, nos. 1619-20 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 290, nos. 875-76.

### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72 - 08.72 (no catalogue).

### IMARI-STYLE FLUTED VASE, WITH FLORAL **DESIGNS INSIDE THE NECK FIG.128**

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Talwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### Bibliography

FRÈCHES, 1974, no. 1, pp. 39-42; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 449, nos. 4738-39; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 468, no. 1621 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 291, no. 877.

### Exhibition

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72 – 08.72 (no catalogue).

### LID OF VASE WITH OCTAGONAL EDGE

Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province, ca. 1700; polychrome and gold porcelain, 27.5 x Ø 27 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.737).

### **Bibliography**

FRÈCHES, 1974, no. 1, pp. 39-42; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 449, no. 4743; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 468, no. 1624 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 291, no. 880.

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72 – 08.72 (no catalogue).

FIG.126 Octogonal lidded vase, Imari style, Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province, ca. 1700; polychrome and gilt porcelain, 62 x Ø 40 cm (jar), 28 x Ø 27.4 cm (lid), 90 cm in total; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes

### LID OF VASE WITH CIRCULAR EDGE

Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province, ca. 1700; polychrome and gold porcelain, 24 x Ø 21cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.738).

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Talwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### **Bibliographie**

FRÈCHES, 1974, no. 1, pp. 39-42; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, no. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 450, no. 4744; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 468, no. 1625 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 291, no. 881.

### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72 - 08.72 (no catalogue).

### TWO VASE LIDS WITH OCTAGONAL EDGES

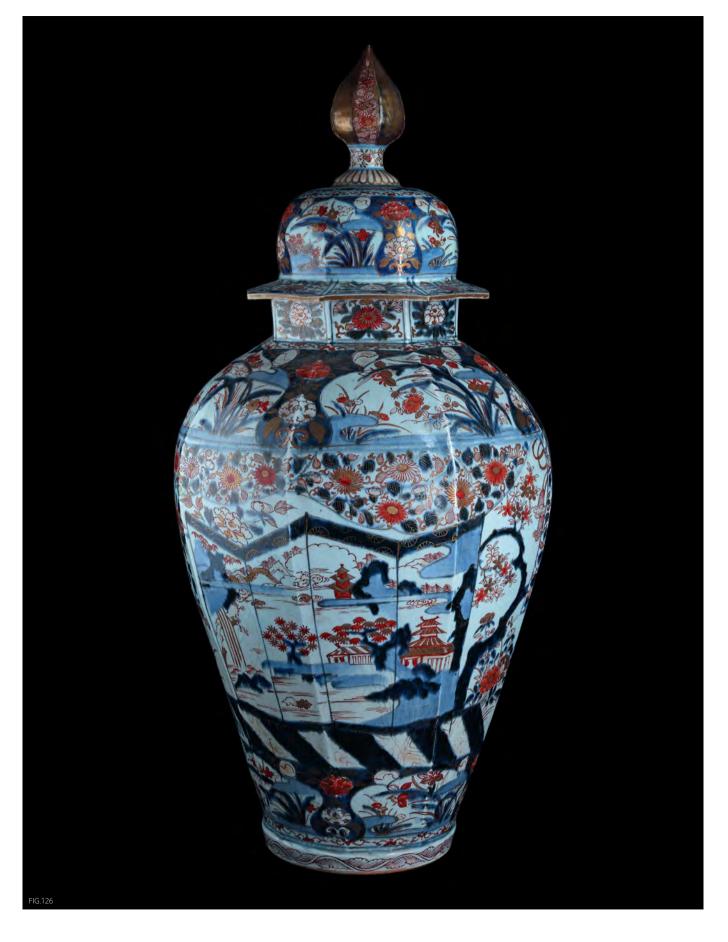
Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province, ca. 1700; polychrome and gold porcelain, 18.5 x Ø 18.5 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beauxarts de Rennes (794.1.739-1 et -2).

### **Observations**

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### **Bibliography**

FRÈCHES, 1974, no. 1, pp. 39-42; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 450, nos. 4745-46; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 468, nos. 1619-20 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 291, nos. 882-83.



A complete set of five pieces (three vases with their lids and two fluted vases), conserved in Strasbourg, 1 is very similar. Nevertheless, the three vases have almost the same height (61.2, 61.3, and 61.4 cm) as do their lids (28 cm), whereas in Rennes, the existence of a lid slightly taller than the two others indicates that this one should be placed on the central vase (794.1.733). One damaged lid corresponds to the third missing vase (794.1.737).

A model of a neighbouring set comprising a lidded vase and two fluted vases, conserved at the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa, with screen motifs against a background in blue oblique stripes, presents an even more elaborate design. Above all, the button on the lid of the vase has a more complicated form than can be seen on the lids from Rennes, whose vase, no doubt smaller, is missing (794.1.738 **FIG.107**).

This shows the variants possible from one set to the next in these models exported to Europe by the Dutch.





FIG.127 Fluted vase, Imari style, Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province,ca. 1700; polychrome and gold porcelain, 60.8 x Ø 28.7 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.734-2).

FIG.128 Fluted vase, Imari style, Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province, ca. 1700; polychrome and gold porcelain, 48.7 x Ø 25 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.735).

FIG.129 Octagonal lidded vase, Imari style, Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province, ca. 1700; polychrome and gilt porcelain, 62.5 x Ø 38 cm (vase), 29 x Ø 27 cm (lid), 90.5 cm in total; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.733-²).



1 MARTIN, 2008.

# BLUE LIDDED VASE

GENEVIÈVE LACAMBRE

### LIDDED VASE FIG.130

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Talwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### **Bibliographie**

MÉZIN, 2002, no. 21, p. 46; FRÈCHES, 1974, no. 1, pp. 39-42; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 450, no. 4750; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 469, nos. 1619-32 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 292, nos. 887-88.

### **Exhibitions**

Cargaison de Chine, Lorient, Musée de la Compagnie des Indes, 06.02-11.02; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beauxarts, 01.72 - 08.72 (no catalogue).

### **LIDDED VASE**

China, Jingdezhen kilns, Jiangxi province, ca. 1680–1700; porcelain with blue design under the lid; European mount in gilt cuprous alloy, 42.8 x Ø 32 cm (vase), 11.8 x Ø 24 cm, 51 cm in total; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.742-²), d2006 endowment to the museum from the Compagnie des Indes, Lorient.

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Talwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

Bibliography:

MÉZIN, 2002, no. 21, p. 46; FRÈCHES, 1974, no. 1, pp. 39–42; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546–95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 450, no. 4751; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 469, nos. 1631–32 (Japan); André, 1868, p. 292, nos. 887–88.

### Exhibitions

Cargaison de Chine, Lorient, Musée de la Compagnie des Indes, 06.02-11.02; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beauxarts, 01.72 - 08.72 (no catalogue).

This traditional embroidered design in stylised foliage and lotus flowers is frequently found on ginger vases. In China, the lotus, a summer flower, is at once a good omen, a symbol of fertility and harmony, and a symbol of Buddhist enlightenment, because its flower, in its purity, contrasts with the muddy swamp in which it blooms. However, Europeans would be oblivious to these meanings.

In the West, these blues and whites would have been imported in vast quantity. In the public collections, we can cite the three with a similar design from Augustus II the Strong (1670–1733) in Dresden, or a larger one at the Christiansborg Palace in Copenhagen.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of porcelain was appreciated by the Grand Dauphin (1661–1711), as the inventory of porcelain shows, in predominantly blue-and-white designs, which were found in his cabinet at the Château de Versailles in 1689: we find basins in a similar format, some encircled by a vermeil mounting. While no document allows us to affirm that those of Président Robien came from the sale of this collection in 1711, they at least attest to the trend of this porcelain in France at the turn of the eighteenth century.

**FIG.130** Lidded vase, China, Jingdezhen kilns, Jiangxi province, ca. 1680–1700; porcelain with blue underglaze; European rim in a golden copper alloy,  $428 \times \varnothing$  34 cm (vase),  $11.5 \times \varnothing$  24.5 cm, 53.5 cm in total; the Robien Collection, Musée des beauxarts de Rennes (794.1.742-1), stored in 2006 at the Musée de la Compagnie des Indes, Lorient.



S MISSE DES BEALLY, ABTS DE BENINES - LANK

<sup>1</sup> CHRISTIANSBORG, 2006, no. 171, repr.

# ROUND PLATES, IMARI STYLE

GENEVIÈVE LACAMBRE

### ROUND PLATE, IMARI STYLE FIG.133

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

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### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72–08.72 (no catalogue).

### ROUND PLATE, IMARI STYLE FIG.131

### Restoration

Natacha Frenkel, 2019.

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### Bibliography

FRÈCHES, 1974, no. 1, pp. 39-42; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 450, no. 4754; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 469, no. 1635 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 292, no. 891.

### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

### ROUND PLATE, IMARI STYLE FIG.132

### Restoration

Natacha Frenkel, 2019.

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013.

### Bibliography

FRÈCHES, 1974, no. 1, pp. 39-42; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 140, nos. 8546-95 (Japan); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 450, no. 4755; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 469, no. 1636 (Japan); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 292, no. 892.

### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72–08.72 (no catalogue).

These three plates, with the typical central motif of a bouquet of flowers in a vase next to a bonsai tree, placed on a low table, has a decoration on the rim that is similar to that of the large lidded vase (794.1.741, FIG.113). Here it comprises flowers, carefully folded papers, and illustrated books laid open. They were certainly imported by one of the ships belonging to the French East India Company, on its way back from Guangzhou. A plate with comparable decorations, gifted by Queen Victoria (1819–1901), is conserved at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London (7332–1860).





**FIG.131** Round plate, Imari style, Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province, ca. 1690–1720; porcelain with blue underglaze, red and gilt enamel,  $5 \times \emptyset$  47.1 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.745-²).

FIG.132 Round plate, Imari style, Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province, ca. 1690-1720; porcelain with blue underglaze, red and gilt enamel, 5.5 x Ø 47.4 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.745-¹).

FIG.133 Round plate, Imari style, Japan, Arita kilns, Hizen province, ca. 1690–1720; porcelain with blue underglaze, red and gilt enamel, 3 x Ø 46 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.743).



### **THE NANIING TOWER FIG.134**

### Restoration

Atelier régional de restauration de Kerguéhennec, Bignan, 2006 (thanks to the patronage of the TEFAF Museum Restoration Fund); Compositic, Ploemeur; Musée de la Nacre et de la Tabletterie, Méru, 2012-2017

### Observations

Jon Culverhouse, Burghley House, Stamford, 2014; Éloïse Falaise, consultant, 2014; Geneviève Lacambre, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2012.

### **Bibliography**

Previously unpublished

### **Exhibition**

20 ans, une histoire d'avenir, Méru, Musée de la Nacre et de la Tabletterie. 16.10.19-01.03.20.

In the heart of the eighteenth century, the trend of chinoiseries was in full swing among the European aristocracy. Furniture, hangings, and tableware: nothing was missing from the decorative designs imported from or inspired by China. Combining refinement and exoticism, they comforted Europeans' proclivities for elegance and refinement, while allowing them to construct an ambiguous cliché around a literate China for whom otium was seen as a modus vivendi. However, this taste did not only consist of assimilations: many purely decorative Chinese productions thus invaded Europe via the European India Companies that were vainly attempting to control an association of Chinese merchants, Co-Hong. Like Robien, the painter François Boucher (1703-1770) collected objects of Chinese export deriving from Canton (their objects were almost the same), the sole port of access to the Empire.

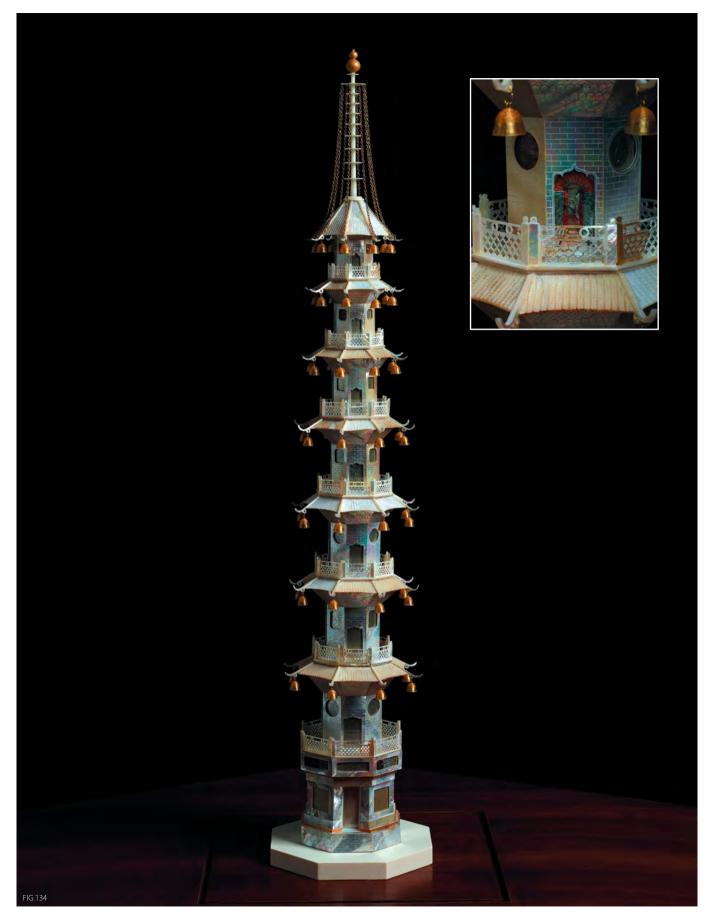
The decorative models of the so-called Nanjing Tower were well known to prestigious collections - Wittelsbach, Landshut, Bavaria; Holstein-Gottorp, Drottningholm, Sweden, etc. and many models were reproduced in all forms, in all materials (rice paper, ivory, or various clays including porcelain) and even included architectural creations (Kew Gardens, London, 1762; Chanteloup, 1775). Much more rare were the ones in mother-of-pearl, like Robien's model (a single mention in sales from the eighteenth century: no. 364 of the Duchess of Mazarin's sale of

10 December 1781: 'Two Nanjing Towers with eight levels in mother-of-pearl'). Another copy identical to this one is still recorded in Europe today at Burghley House in Lincolnshire; another, possibly similar, privately owned, is now in Sussex; two others are at the Palace Museum in Beijing (G 178968 and G 178969):2 so there are very few.

The monument of the Nanjing Tower, a Buddhist sanctuary built in 1431 in the northwest of Shanghai under the supervision of Zheng He (1371-1433) was considered in the West to be one of the world's wonders in architectural construction. Octagonal in form, made entirely out of porcelain with no joints visible, it measured nearly eighty metres high, comprised eight stories, and haunted the tales of the travellers who had been able to go to China. Robien owned the book by Jan Nieuhof from 1665, L'Ambassade de la Compagnie Orientale vers l'Empereur. who talked about it with dazzled enthusiasm.3 From the Ming period (1368-1644), Chinese workshops made reduced-scale models of it for use as reliquaries, and later for purely decorative

It was in 2012 that I recovered in the storerooms of the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes countless wooden, glass, and mother-of-pearl fragments from within a shoe box, on which this simple mention appeared: 'S/N' (due to the fact that it did not even feature among the antiquities catalogues of the museum; at best, there was a stocktake from 1850 that indicated it as follows: 'no. 479: debris of a small pagoda - Nanjing Tower - with 8 floors once entirely covered with mother-of-pearl plates cut out and adorned with engraved designs - all dislocated, many pieces of mother-of-pearl are missing'). Since Robien had proudly described his 'famous tower' in his 1740 manuscript and since the item was well recorded in the inventory of the revolutionary Confiscation of 1794, which even mentions its size, it was not hard to understand that this was well and truly one of the president's sublime 'Works of Art'. Five years were required by the restoration teams to remount and restore this work entirely, from the digitization of all of its fragments down to the cutting of the missing mother-of-pearl pieces. We would like to extend our immense gratitude to them and particularly to the two mother-of-pearl artists who were able to undertake this work, Stéphanie Millet and Jean-François Barthélémy.

FIG.134 Nanking Tower, China, Guangzhou (Canton), late 17th century and pre-1740; sculpted wood and engraved, open-worked, and gilded mother-of-pearl plates, wash on paper covered with glass plates, additive techniques, 93 x Ø 14cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes



<sup>1</sup> SOAME JENYNS, 1965, vol. 2, p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> BÉGUIN, 1996, p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> NIEUHOF. 1665.

### LITHOPHONE FIG.136

### Restoration

Christian Binet, 2005

### Observations

Kung-Shin Chou, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2011 (China, Ming?, domestic bell); Jean-Paul Desroches, Musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet, 2006 (Japan, Shintoism, eleventh century?); Joël Dugot and Philippe Bruguières, Cité de la musique, Paris, 1997 (China); Florence Gétreau, Conservatoire National de Musique, Paris, 1988.

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### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72 - 08.72 (no catalogue).

Evidently, Robien did not have the same interest as François Boucher (1703-1770) for exotic musical instruments. Whereas the famous rococo painter was in possession of a wonderful collection, only three objects from the parliamentarian's collection enter this category: the African horn (see Nicholes Bridges, Olifant, pp. 186-187), a sheng (mouth organ), and the rare lithophone in blue limestone, with superb resonance. The object was however perfectly identified during the revolutionary confiscations of 1794, where it is precisely described: 'A sea monster in Chinese soapstone suspended in the middle of a wooden base. This was placed over the doorways of certain Chinese homes' (see Annexes, pp. 348-351). We find a correlation in the form of bells hung in the collections of the old Kunstkammer of Habsburg in Munich (1055 / 945).

A perfect image of the chimera popularised in the nineteenth century by the spectacles of Phineas Barnum (1810–1891), who presented sculptures with small, fake, monstrous mermaids, apparently 'from Japan', this object actually represents the metamorphosis of a dragon into a carp from the Yi River, a tributary of the Yellow River, when it passes before the Longmen Grottoes, one of



the largest Buddhist cultural centres in China. It holds a pearl in its mouth symbolising the sun in spring, thus completing its strong symbolism of good fortune, fertility, and regeneration.

The object was apparently used to sound the hours, but owing to a lack of references, we still do not know whether its vocation was more to mark time within a domestic sphere or a religious context.

FIG.135 Sheng, mouth organ, China, ca. 1700 (?); lacquered bamboo and ivory, 41.5 x 10.4 x 6.9 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.707).

FIG.136 Lithophone hung from a portico, China, Song dynasty, 960–1279 (?); sculpted and engraved slate blue marble, 49.5 x 26 x 2.3 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes



# ROBIEN'S CHINESE COLLECTION

FIG.137 Teapot, China, Yixing, early 18th century; terracotta, 11.5 x 14.3 x 7.8 cm; drawing in Robien's manuscript Description historique de son cabinet, ca. 1740, pl. 1 (Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, Rennes, MS 0546); the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.670).

From the moment I first learned of the existence of Christophe-Paul Robien's collection of art and artifacts from around the globe, I have been fascinated with it. How extraordinary that it was spared from the ravages of violence, impoverishment, and apathy that have been responsible for the dispersal of so many similar and celebrated collections over time. Robien's collection - assembled by an individual in France in the first half of the eighteenth century - shares deep affinities with another rare survivor close to my heart: the core collection of my own institution, the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts.

In 1799, a decade after the revolutionary violence in France that ironically preserved Robien's collection in amber, a group of Salem sea captains formed the East India Marine Society, the precursor of PEM. Today, Salem is a sleepy little village outside of Boston which is perhaps best known for the violence its citizens perpetrated on twenty souls accused of witchcraft in 1692. But a century later, Salem was the wealthiest city per capita in the United States of America and that vast wealth was almost entirely due to global trade. Ships from Salem ventured to Asia only months after the nation's founding. In the early years of the Republic, the import duties on Asian goods represented a sizeable portion of the

country's budget. Marine societies cropped up in many cities up and down the Atlantic coast in the late eighteenth century to facilitate the exchange of navigational information and to serve as a support network for the families of members who died at sea. But, membership in the East India Marine Society (EIMS) was limited to those Salem captains and supercargoes (business managers of the vessel) who had navigated the seas beyond the Cape of Good Hope or Cape Horn.

The Society's by-laws further articulated that its members should 'form a Museum of natural and artificial curiosities, particularly such as are to be found beyond the Cape of Good Hope or Cape Horn.' The EIMS collection, like Robien's, are global in scope. It includes extraordinary early caches of material from Oceania, North America, and Asia; China, Japan, Indonesia, and India are particularly well represented. Roughly a third of the over 6,000 objects collected in the early nineteenth century survive today in PEM's collection. The Society's Chinese collection shares close affinities with Robien's and includes a 'Chinese lady's shoe', 'part of the horn of a rhinoceros in the form of a wine glass','a Chinese padlock' and 'a small Chinese mandarin [unfired clay figure])', each one brought back by a different Captain within a year of the Society's founding.<sup>2</sup> Those



<sup>2</sup> SCHWARTZ, 2020.





close affinities made me want to know more about the collections now preserved in Rennes.

Chinese luxuries including porcelain, lacquer, and silk were avidly displayed in fashionable French interiors of the elite and even, to some extent, the middle classes throughout the eighteenth century. These imports brought a riot of new colour, pattern, and texture to interiors that were otherwise relatively monochromatic and spare. Today, overwhelmed as we are by almost constant visual stimulation, it is especially difficult to comprehend the delight and shock that Chinese imports must have had in Europe at this time. These luxuries brought tremendous visual pleasure, but also consider the impact they had on the other senses. What must a cool, thin porcelain cup have felt like on the lips of a man who had only ever drunk from a stoneware, pewter, or glass vessel? Imagine the soft hand, quiet rustle, and weightlessness of a Chinese silk gown if you've only ever worn wool or linen.

European consumers may have celebrated these Chinese imports for their foreignness and the tremendous distances they had travelled. But, many would have been less aware that they were often equally a reflection of transcultural artistic interactions. By the middle of the eighteenth century, all foreign trade with China was required by Imperial edict to take place in the southern port city of Guangzhou, known to foreigners since the sixteenth century as Canton. Merchants from around the world flocked to this thriving port city,

but they were restricted to a cluster of Europeanstyle buildings called hongs, or factories, located along the Pearl River outside the walls of the city. This small enclave was arguably one of the most diverse and cosmopolitan places in the world in the eighteenth century. Here, the Co-Hong, a group of thirteen Chinese merchants appointed by the government to oversee foreign commerce. interacted with Parsee merchants from India as well as traders from all the principle trading nations. Each had journeyed there to make fortunes shipping tea, porcelain and other goods to distant markets in Europe, India, Africa and the Americas. In this city in Guangdong Province, more than a hundred thousand Chinese artists of all kinds (painters, embroiderers, silversmiths, lacquer artists) adeptly altered the designs of their wares to cater to these diverse European and Asian markets. Artists as far afield as Jingdezhen, the ceramics capital of the world in Jiangxi province, also altered their wares to cater to the tastes of foreign merchants in Guangzhou. For example, the Chinese green palette porcelain basins in Robien's collection, made in lingdezhen, were likely once part of wall cistern sets (794.1.683 FIG.125). Their enameled decoration is typical of ceramics used locally, but the shape of these basins (and the missing wall cisterns which likely once accompanied them) are based on European forms that would have not been familiar to or used by Chinese consumers

China's durable luxuries were widely praised in Europe, but the greatest profits to be made were on consumable commodities: spices and tea. Used culinarily, imported Asian spices enlivened European palettes. Used medicinally, they changed the way Europeans treated maladies. Cloves helped treat memory loss, nausea, and asthma, while nutmeg was used against diarrhea, seasickness, skin rash, and bad breath.3

Tea, first used medicinally in the seventeenth century, became a widely consumed beverage with a profound impact on European culture. By the early 1700s, 'taking tea' had become an indispensible addition to many social gatherings in Europe. Europeans eagerly sought information on how

tea was produced. Imported Chinese watercolour images of the various stages of tea production satisfied these appetites and offered Europeans some of their earliest representations of Chinese landscapes (see Karina Corrigan Two Chinese albums pp.302-307).

The emerging trend of 'taking tea' also required the introduction of new equipment to serve the fashionable beverage. The earliest teapots exported to Europe came from Yixing in Jiangsu province, where potters produced refined, unglazed stoneware (rather than porcelain) in earth tones. Tea drinkers in China prized Yixing wares because the unglazed surface retained the beverage's taste. color, and aroma. Robien's collection includes two Yixing stoneware teapots, one a double walled example with pierced sides (FIG.137). He may have used these teapots functionally or perhaps for display in his collection of curiosities.

Robien's collection does not include a lot of Chinese ceramics but there are examples from each of the four primary kiln sites in China that produced ceramics for export: Jingdezhen (see Geneviève Lacambre, Round plate, Imari style, pp. 252-253 and Karina Corrigan, Pair of horses, pp. 300-301), Dehua (see Karina Corrigan, Several Dehua Ceramics, pp. 286-289), Yixing and Zhangzhou (FIG.138). Ceramics made in the regional kilns in Zhangzhou were primarily exported to Southeast Asia and Japan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where their vibrant patterns in a bright palette of red, green, and turquoise enamels were particularly prized.4 Zhangzhou wares are not frequently found within seventeenth and eighteenth century European contexts, making Robien's colourful, simply thrown charger particularly interesting.

Robien's collection includes Chinese porcelain, lacguer, and the accoutrements for tea consumption and decorative works such as the mother-of-pearl pagoda (see François Coulon, The Nanjing Tower pp.268-269), the highlight of the Chinese collection. But it also contains many Chinese works which were not as widely found in fashionable European homes. In this short essay, I want to highlight three additional works in Robien's collection which reflect his more esoteric and nuanced approach to collecting: an opium pipe, a fixed fan and a root wood carving.

Opium, a potent painkiller derived from the sap of the opium poppy (papaver somniferum), was eaten for medicinal and recreational purposes in China for centuries. By the seventeenth century, the Chinese had adopted the custom of smoking opium mixed with tobacco imported from the Americas. Pipes to smoke it were designed with exceptionally long handles to allow the smoker to recline on his side while an attendant prepared the opium in the pipe's bowl. Heating the bowl over a lamp, the smoker vaporised the opium mixture, inhaled the smoke, and soon fell into a deep sleep. In an attempt to curtail this highly addictive and rapidly expanding practice, the Yongzheng emperor formally prohibited opium's sale in China in 1729. But as Europeans scrambled to find alternatives to importing silver to China - the only thing the Qing empire wanted in exchange for coveted tea, silk and porcelain - they began illegally importing large quantities of Indian opium to China. This illegal trade expanded throughout the eighteenth century and would ultimately result in China's loss of sovereignty in the midnineteenth century. Robien's collection included at least one opium pipe (FIG.139). One of the earliest Chinese works in the PEM's collection was the 'bowl of a Chinese Pipe for Smoking Opium,' donated to the East India Marine Society in 1800 by Salem Captain John Derby (PEM, E22992). Foreigners were fascinated by the custom, which was widely regarded as evidence of the inferiority and indolence of the Chinese people; few acknowledged their own central role in this drug smuggling and its associated suffering.

Fans made in a wide range of materials - silk, lacquer, bamboo, and even silver filigree - were exported from China to Europe in enormous quantities in the eighteenth century. Many were folding fans, but a smaller group of fixed fans not specifically made for export also found their way to Europe. Robien's collection includes a

**<sup>3</sup>** IACOBS, 2006, p. 15, 21,

<sup>4</sup> CANEPA, 2006, p. 115-117.

**<sup>5</sup>** KWAN, 2011, p. 65.

**FIG.139** Opium Pipe, China, first half of the 18th century; darkened wood and wood, 95 x 3.2 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.716).

FIG.140 Screen, China, first half of the 18th century; latanier palm frond, wood, ivory, and tortoiseshell, 45.7 x 35.3 x 2.1 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.710).



particularly fine fixed fan likely made in Zhejiang or Guangdong Province (FIG.140). Made from a giant dried palm leaf, Robien's fan has a carved ivory support, a patterned wood handle, and edges wrapped with thin strips of bamboo to keep the leaf from splitting. A similar example survives in the Palace Museum and was an imperial gift from Guangdong Province officials in the late eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the collection's important survival, we do not know enough about how and why Robien acquired and displayed specific works in the collection he amassed in his mansion on the rue du Foulon in Rennes. Several well do cumented, scholarly collections of Chinese art – one in France and two in the Netherlands – offer us an opportunity to speculate about his motivations and the networks throughout Europe and within France into which he may have tapped to acquired these works.

Nicolaes Witsen (1641–1717), mayor of Amsterdam and VOC director, used his professional connections to develop an astonishingly large network of global contacts and amass a wide-ranging collection of curiosities. Among his friends he counted ship's captains, a Russian tsar, Jesuit missionaries, merchants, and Calvinist ministers. For nearly fifty years during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, his network provided him with a steady stream of objects, books, personal reports, and drawings from around the world.

Witsen obtained most of his Chinese objects and information from Jesuit missionaries who worked there as interpreters and cartographers.<sup>6</sup>

The collection of antiquities and global curiosities assembled by Parisian antiquarian and author, comte de Caylus, warrants comparison to Robien's because of its broad focus and the fact that he was collecting in France only slightly later than Robien. Caylus' collection included unusual Chinese imports such as hardstone table screens, paintings, and coins as well as more widely collected porcelain. Contemporary accounts note that Caylus arranged works from China and the Americas together on the staircase of his home, leading visitors up to the gallery for his collection of antiquities. Although he collected Chinese works, Caylus wrote disparagingly of imports from China into France in the eighteenth century in his widely disseminated volumes, Recueil d'antiquités, published between 1752 and 1767. Caylus chose not to illustrate any Chinese works from his collection in the Recueil d'antiquités, which may have had as much to do with his difficulty in learning more about them as his ambivalence toward them.7 Robien may have similarly struggled to gain accurate information about the collections he assembled.

Antiquarian and lawyer Theodore Royer (1737–1807) began assembling a Chinese collection in The Hague the 1760s. Unlike Witsen, Robien, and Caylus, Royer focused his attention exclusively on China. Through his collection, he attempted to



<sup>7</sup> SMENTEK, 2019.



<sup>8</sup> CAMPEN, 2000 a.



create an accurate impression of literati life in China and tried unsuccessfully to teach himself Chinese. Royer's collection ultimately included unfired clay figures, enamel plaques, carvings in soapstone and wood and over 2000 Chinese watercolours. Many are closely related to works which Robien collected fifty years prior.8

Robien's collection includes seven root wood sculptures of Chinese figures, similar to the thirty preserved in Royer's collection (FIG.141). Starting with a piece of burl or root wood, the artist would partially 'free' a figure from the wood by carving it out, leaving intact much of the heavily gnarled surface which had been 'carved by nature'. This type of carving was originally created for literati audiences in China. Similar Chinese carvings are preserved in European royal and scholarly collections, but they were not widely collected in Europe.

Many of the works in all four of these collections arrived in Europe via Amsterdam. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the VOC (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or Dutch East India Company) was the largest and most powerful trading company in the world. The VOC's engagement with Asia made Amsterdam a European centre for global trade. Imported goods were initially acquired in bulk by consortia of merchants working directly with the VOC and resold privately in the city's emerging luxury shops. Goods were later sold more widely through public auctions organised by the VOC. In addition to the goods offered in the VOC sales and luxury shops, Asian imports were also available on the second-hand market in local bankruptcy and estate sales. Newspapers often announced upcoming auctions and gave short descriptions of the goods on offer.

Agents for European nobility and the marchand-merciers who retailed Asian porcelain and lacquer in France frequently traveled to Amsterdam to purchase imported Asian works. Edmé François Gersaint, whose shop, A La Pagode was one of the most fashionable and popular luxury goods venues in Paris, made frequent trips to the Netherlands to purchase works for his clients.9 Robien likely acquired some of his Chinese collection via agents in Amsterdam or Leipzig, another retail centre in Europe, but he also likely purchased work locally from French merchants with connections to China. The Compagnie des Indes was never as successful or widespread as either the VOC or the British East India Company, but Asian works were imported directly to France on voyages sponsored by the Compagnie. In 1720, for example, the ship Compte de Toulouse returned to Staint-Malo from a long voyage to Asia loaded with cases of tea, lacquer screens, and a large collection of porcelain. The bulk of the cargo was sold in a series of public auctions in early September. Merchants from all over France including at least one merchant from Rennes came to the sale. An aptly named marchand-mercier from Paris, M. Orient, purchased thirty-five Chinese lacguer screens for 14,000 livres each, as well as porcelain, mostly composed of cups and saucers at the sale.10

Given the more nuanced and esoteric nature of the works in Robien's collection, he may have also acquired some works directly from Compagnie des Indes sailors returning home from China. See Genevieve Lacambre's essay in this volume for a more in-depth discussion of how Japanese and Chinese works traversed diverse routes to France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. 11

FIG.141 Old man with basket, China, first half of the 18th century; sculpted root (bamboo?), 24.3 x 13 x 6.3 cm; the Robien Collection. Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.649).

**<sup>9</sup>** SARGENTSON, 1996, pp. 63-64.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the various itineraries of Japanese and Chinese objects taken to France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Geneviève Lacambre, Robien: China or Japan?, pp. 230-241

# CARVED FIGURE OF A NUDE WOMAN ON A KANG FIG.142

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016 ('pleasure' objects or objects for sexual education); Kung-Shin Chou, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2011 (objects for sexual education, based on a Ming model); Jean-Paul Desroches, Musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet, Paris, 2011 (erotic objects for export?).

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### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72–08.72 (no catalogue).

### SIX EROTIC FIGURAL GROUPS FIG.145

### Restoration

Atelier régional de restauration, Kerguéhennec, Bignan, 2006

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Rebecca Langlands, University of Exeter, 2014; Kung-Shin Chou, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2011; Jean-Paul Desroches, Musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet, Paris, 2005.

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Le temps des libertinages, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 13.06.14-04.01.15; Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

# TWO PANELS REPRESENTING CHINESE INTERIORS FIGS.43 and 144

### Restoration

Marie-Rose Gréca, 2012

### Observation

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Timothy Brook, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2014; Romuald Morel, connoisseur, Paris, 2013.

### Observations

RIMAUD, 2019, no. 25, p. 80 (no. 626); COULON, 2015 a; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 136, nos. 8302-03 (China); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 436, nos. 4583-84; ANDRÉ, 1876, pp. 444-445, nos. 1490-91 (China); ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 269-270, nos. 762-63.

### **Exhibitions**

Une des Provinces du rococo, la Chine rêvée de interior in which a woman and a young boy observe copulating chickens. A woman behind arts et d'archéologie, 09.11.2019–02.03.2020; the door and beyond the threshold also peeks Le temps des libertinages, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 13.06.14–04.01.15. also visible in the second plaque (1794.1.625),

Robien's collection includes a large and interesting group of unusual Chinese erotica. I want to begin with an exploration of two mixed media plaques whose erotic imagery is comparatively subtle (FIGS.143 and 144). Each framed plaque depicts an interior with figures and animals. The artist used inlaid hardstone and layers of paint-covered rice paper pulp to create paintings that are physically three-dimensional. These works also incorporate a cross-cultural form of visual dimensionality and layering seen in some late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Chinese vernacular paintings. Note how the open windows and the thresholds as well as the lines along the walls create the illusion of successive spaces within the composition. The space is also dominated by grey and black floor tiles which are, by contrast, not represented in perspective. Chinese painting scholar James Cahill notes that some Chinese vernacular works of art derived perspectival elements from early northern European imagery - likely imported Netherlandish prints. Although Cahill writes exclusively about paintings, these more three-dimensional works also conform to what he called a 'northern see-through system'.1

FIG.142 Woman with a fan lying on a Kang, China, Qing dynasty, 1700–1750; ivory, cardboard, brocade, and green, red, and black pigments, 22 x 6 x 2.6 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.643).

FIG.143 Interior scene with dogs, China, Qing dynasty, first half of the 18th century; wood, pulp of rice paper, rice paper, painted steatite, 35.1 x 27.8 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.625).

FIG.144 Interior scene with dogs, China, Qing dynasty, first half of the 18th century; wood, pulp of rice paper, rice paper, painted soapstone, 35.1 x 27.8 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.625).

Cahill also observed the striking use of "Westerninspired illusionism for erotic effects" in many of these Chinese vernacular works. The pale blue curtain in the upper left hand corner of one panel (1794.1.626) is tied back to reveal an interior in which a woman and a young boy observe copulating chickens. A woman behind the door and beyond the threshold also peeks also visible in the second plague (1794.1.625), where a spectacled man peers into the scene from outside through the window. Here, two elegantly dressed and coiffed women recline on a kang while stroking a dog whose penis is visibly erect. The dog's partner looks on from the floor. These panels share a close affinity with shadow boxes whose sliding lids decorated with benign scenes open to reveal more overt mixed media erotic scenes.<sup>2</sup> The Robien mixed-media panels also share an interesting visual relationship with four enamel on copper plaques collected in the 1760s by Dutch collector Jean Theodore Royer (1737-1807).3

Robien's collection includes yet another elegant Chinese woman reclining on a *kang*, but this time she is naked (FIG.142). This carved ivory figure of a Chinese woman wears only a red belt and red shoes on her tiny bound feet (1794.1.643.1). In fact, all of the different representations of Chinese women in Robien's erotica collection

- 1 CAHILL, 2010, pp. 78-84.
- 2 Several images of this kind are found in BERTHOLET, 2010, pp. 152-154, two of which present the recognisable tiled floor that we find in the plates of the Robien Collection.
- **3** Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, AK-NM-6620.A-D; see also GRASSKAMP, 2015.4 For a detailed analysis of the practice of foot binding in China, see PING, 2000.







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have bound feet. The slow, violent practice of repeatedly binding a young girl's growing foot to transform it into a 'three-inch lotus' was a cultural practice unique to women in late Imperial China. Synonymous with beauty, status, endurance, and eroticism in China, the practice was also fascinating to eighteenth and nineteenth century Europeans attempting to understand Chinese culture.4

In her right hand, she holds a fixed feather fan; her left hand may have once rested on a pillow. Resting on a bed made of cardboard covered in a yellow ground brocaded silk decorated with cloud scrolls, she demurely gazes at the viewer while simultaneously opening her legs to reveal her labia, accented in the same red paint as her accessories.

The function of these types of carved ivory figures has long been debated – some have speculated that they were used by Chinese doctors who were prevented from examining their female patients directly and could discuss ailments using a carved model. But these figures' coy and impractical postures make this hypothesis implausible. They were far more likely sensuous sculptures intended to be fondled and admired. I also wonder if they could have ever been used in China as titillating brush rests? I'm struck by how similar the posture of Robien's nude is to a carved brush rest in the form of a fully clothed reclining scholar in contemplation in the Sir Victor Sassoon Collection.<sup>5</sup>

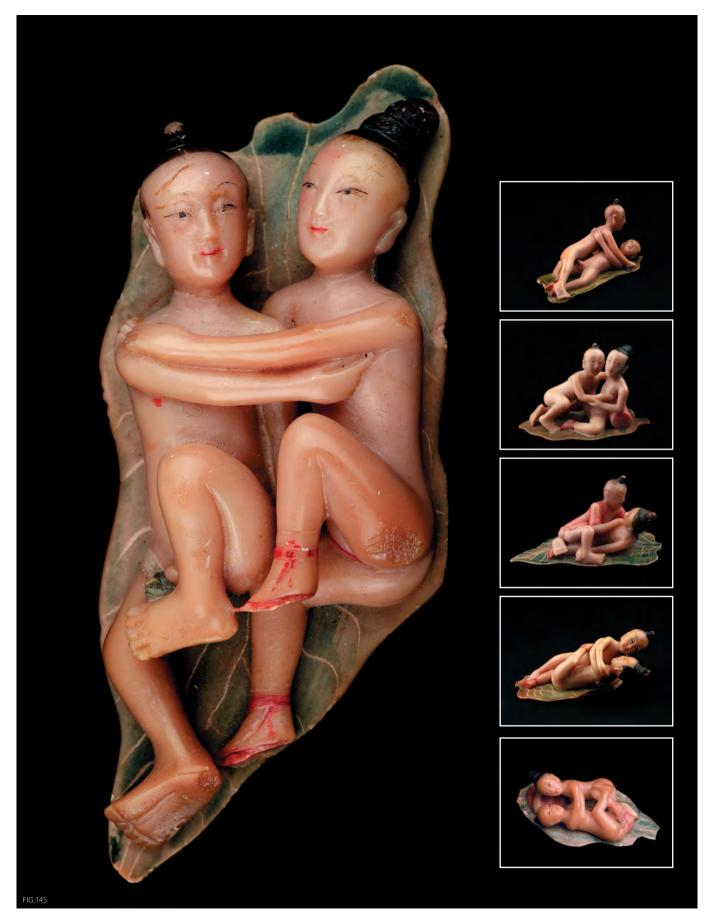
A related, but more awkwardly arranged and carved figure, brought back to Denmark from Guangzhou on the *Kronprins Christian* in 1732, survives in the Royal Danish Collection (EBc209). First inventoried in 1737, it was described as 'et liidet Elffenbeens Billede udi een Eske som forestiller hvorleedes de Chinesiske Fruentimmer sover, samme er bragt fra China A° 1732'. The Royal Danish collection also includes an embracing, but less overtly erotic Chinese couple (EBc191). Elegantly carved in ivory, this sculpture of a fully clothed couple was once in Ole Worm's important early *wunderkammer* and was imported to Europe before 1655.

Far more direct than the demure couple in Copenhagen, Robien's collection includes a group of six carved steatite sculptures of couples engaged in intercourse (FIG.145). Each pair lies on a large carved green leaf and assumes a different position. With the exception of one man, who wears a red jacket but has already removed

his trousers, all of the figures are depicted fully naked. The quality of the carving is simple, with limited contouring of the rubbery limbs and comparatively blank faces – these are not couples whose faces speak of a frenzied passion! Similar carvings were uncovered during excavations at the Louvre in 1984 and a tantalizingly similar figural group<sup>8</sup> of two bodies entwined and posed on the same leaf is in the collection of Musée Guimet, where it is catalogued as from Cochin China.<sup>9</sup> A nude female figure on a similar leaf carved in soapstone sold at Christie's London on November 16

In the early seventeenth century, Shen Defu (1578-1642) noted that that Chinese carvers 'made small figures of pairs in sexual congress which were of the highest artistic quality'. 10 Finely carved figures in ivory of naked intertwining couples – some of them even in two interlocking parts - survive. But the small Robien collection of erotic sculptures in steatite does not share a close affinity with other Chinese carvings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Given the women's bound feet we can assume that they were principally intended for a Chinese audience. But François Coulon has tantalizingly suggested in the exhibition catalogue for Le temps des libertinages<sup>11</sup> that they could have been carved anywhere within the Chinese diasporic community throughout Southeast Asia. Hopefully, with the wide dissemination of this multi-volume catalogue, related works will surface from obscurity and add context to these intriguing works of art.

FIG.145 Six erotic groups, China or Southeast Asia, Qing dynasty, late 17th century, early 18th century; painted soapstone, 9 x 4 x 4 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.925–794.1.930).



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**<sup>4</sup>** For a detailed analysis of the practice of foot binding in China, see PING, 2000.

**<sup>5</sup>** KERR, 2016, pp. 148–149; the Sassoon Collection also contains two reclining nude female figures, pp. 300–301.

<sup>6 &#</sup>x27;Et liidet Elffenbeens Billede udi een Eske som forestiller hvorleedes de Chinesiske Fruentimmer sover, samme er bragt fra China A° 1732', GUNDESTRUP, 1991, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> COULON, 2015 a

**<sup>9</sup>** Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Ben Janssens, Oriental Art, TEFAF 2015 catalogue, Amsterdam, March 2015, p. 114; see WATSON, 1984, pp. 41–43.

**<sup>11</sup>** COULON, 2015 a.

### FIGURES OF IMMORTALS FIGS. 146 and 147

### **Observations**

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Jo-Hsin Chi, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2014; Kung-Shin Chou, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2011; Jean-Paul Desroches, Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet, Paris, 2011.

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### **Exhibitions**

Never exhibited

These two figures are part of a group of small carved steatite sculptures in Robien's collection. Figures such as these were made throughout Fujian and Guangdong provinces for Chinese scholarly collectors and for private devotion. Steatite, known in China as hua shi (slippery stone), dong shi (frozen stone) and lu shi (wax stone), is a metamorphic stone composed primarily of talc (magnesium silicate). Valued less than jade, bamboo, and ivory in China, steatite is one of the softest stones and is therefore quite easy to carve. Skilled carvers incorporated the natural changes in the rock for aesthetic purposes, occasionally using paint for a figure's features and sometimes augmenting the incised lines meant to represent a figure's clothing with accents of paint or gold.

Robien's collection include six figures likely meant to represent some of the eight Daoist Immortals or Luohan, figures on the path to Enlightenment in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. In Chinese art, Luohan, or arhats, are often depicted in groups of sixteen, eighteen, or five hundred.2 Some seated and others standing, several figures in Robien's collection incorporate identifiable attributes. One of two figures illustrated here a smiling, seated Immortal - likely represents Nagasena or the Waer luohan. He is often depicted cleaning his left ear with an ear pick to represent his ability to hear the truth. Augustus the Strong's early eighteenth century collection in Dresden included at least 460 steatite carvings including a more refined example of this figure.3

Arhats were sometimes represented as foreigners with exaggerated lips, cheeks, and eyes such as a bearded figure in the Robien collection (FIG. 148). This fragment relates closely to a complete figure holding a gourd in the Musée du Quai Branly. The Robien collection also includes three carvings in a whiter form of steatite: a large Budai, or laughing Buddha, a small carved stag, and the carved base for a figure, now missing, which was perhaps a figure of Guanyin based on an early collection label.

Made primarily for use within China, figures such as these were sometimes collected by European merchants trading in southern China not far from the sources of the stones. Archival evidence suggests that many of the steatite figures in early European royal and scholarly collections were acquired from dealers in the Netherlands<sup>4</sup>. But, Robien's examples may have been purchased in Paris or through more local sources.

The 1690 inventory of the Royal Danish collection includes at least seven related steatite figures such as a seated Luohan (EBc198) described as 'een Indianisk Afgud af hviid Steen' (an Indian Idol of white Stone) and three standing figures of Daoist Immortals (EBa25-27) described as 'Tre Indianske Afguder, udskaaren af eeen grønagtig Steen, som een Jaspis. The quality of the carvings in Denmark, all collected in the seventeenth century, are considerably higher than those in Robien's collection.

Swedish Queen Ulrica Eleonora's 'alabaster figures' are closer in quality to those in Rennes. The royal collection at Drottingholm now includes twelve steatite carvings including figures of Daoist Immortals, carved landscapes with figures, and a Qilin. In 1709, Zacharius Conrad von Uffenbach noted a number of steatite carvings in the collection of Anton Ulrich, Duke of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel.

Soapstone figures were not limited to European royal collections. Sir Hans Sloane, whose early eighteenth century collection was the foundational collection of the British Museum, owned at least fourteen steatite Chinese figures (SLMisc.1174, SLMisc.1175 SLMisc.1178). When originally catalogued, they were described as being carved 'en pâte de riz ou dans un sorte d'albâtre'. Jean Theodore Royer (1737–1807), a lawyer and preacher in The Hague with a passionate interest in Chinese culture, also

**FIG.146** Figure of an immortal, probably Nagasena, China, Province of Fujian or Guangdong, Qing dynasty, first half of the 18th century; painted soapstone,  $7.5 \times 6.3 \times 4.7$  cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.637).

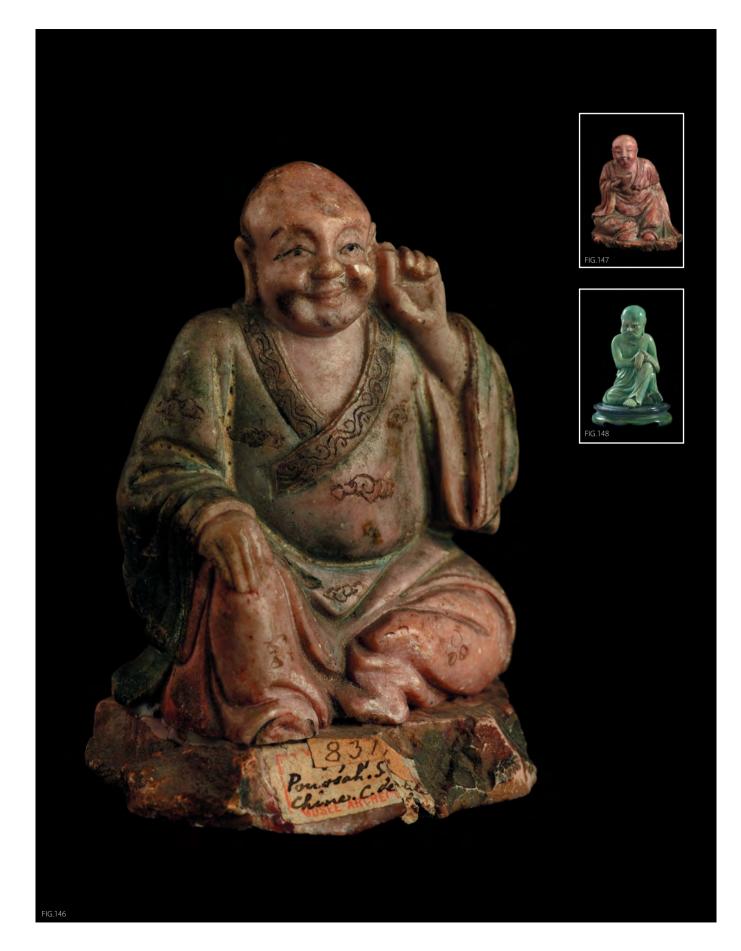
FIG.147 Figure of an immortal, China, Province of Fujian or Guangdong, Qing dynasty, fig.176 Opium Pipe, China, first half of the 18th century; darkened wood and wood, 95 x 3.2 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.716).

FIG.148 Luohan, China, mid-18th century; varnished green terracotta, 28 x Ø 18,5 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.710).

owned steatite figures – several finely carved and gilded examples as well as other less refined, more mass-produced works similar to those in Robien's collection.<sup>8</sup>



**2** LITTLE, 1992, p. 255.



**<sup>3</sup>** KOLB, 2010, fig. 119, p. 107. **4** CAMPEN 2011 p. 160

**<sup>5</sup>** GUNDESTRUP, 1991, pp. 13, 59.

**<sup>6</sup>** SETTERWALL, 1972, pp. 184-185, 306-307.

<sup>7</sup> CAMPEN, 2011, p. 160.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 153

### **FEMALE FIGURE** FIG.149

### Restoration

Juliette Vignier-Dupin, 2006

### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Kung-Shin Chou, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2011; Jean-Paul Desroches, Musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet, Paris, 2011.

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BANÉAT, 1932, p. 137, no. 8368 (China); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 443, no. 4649; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 455, no. 1550 (China); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 279, no. 817.

### **Exhibitions**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

Chinese ceramics made for export to Europe came from three distinct kiln sites - Jingdezhen, Yixing, and Dehua. Porcelains from Dehua, in Fujian province, were celebrated for their sugary-white clay bodies and sculptural forms constructed primarily in moulds. The white wares from Dehua are now sometimes called blanc de chine wares, a term coined by Albert Jacquemart, a nineteenth century French scholar. In period records, they were simply called 'white wares' or not distinguished from decorated wares at all. Figures, incense burners, and cups represented the bulk of the export trade from Dehua. The city's potters were particularly famous for their large statues of Guanyin - the Buddhist Bodhisattva of mercy - and other Buddhist and Daoist religious figures. Song Yingxing, writing in 1637 noted that 'in the potteries of Dehua there are fabricated only the figures of divinities and statuettes of famous persons artistically modelled and various ornamental objects of fantastical forms not intended for actual use'.1

This hollow, thin-walled figure of a Chinese woman (FIG.149) with a high, rounded hairstyle and long robes was constructed using two-piece press moulds for the head and different sections of the body. Dehua potters cost-effectively varied their products by combining moulded forms in different ways. For example, the Robien Collection includes a small Dehua figure of Guanyin with an infant and two other figures to the port city of Amoy (Xiamen), an early 2 LEDDEROSE, 2000, p. 3.



(FIG.151). The potters made each element separately in press moulds and combined them on a plinth to create the sculpture. Figures like these, produced at Dehua in a variety of sizes, derive from a well-established system of modular production in China that anticipated the assembly lines of the European Industrial Revolution by hundreds of years.2

Porcelains made in Dehua which were intended for export to Europe were typically transported FIG.149 Female character (detail), China, Dehua, Oing dynasty, 1690-1720; porcelain enhanced with red, black, and gilt added in Europe, probably in the Netherlands, 44.5 x 12 x 9.5 cm; the Robien Collection. Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.680).

FIG.150 Female character, China, Dehua, Qing dynasty, 1690-1720; porcelain enhanced with red, black, and gilt added in Europe, probably in the Netherlands, 42 x 14 x 8.5 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beauxarts de Rennes (794.1.679).



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centre for Dutch trade in Asia located less than seventy miles from the kilns. From there, they were brought to London and Amsterdam on East India Company and VOC ships, where they were often augmented with red, gold, and black paint and gilding.<sup>3</sup> In Amsterdam, dealers and agents from throughout Europe purchased these wares for collectors and the aristocracy. Robien likely acquired his figures from one of the many marchand-merciers in Paris, who offered newly imported wares as well as antiques purchased from French estates, or from an intermediary in Rennes.

Based on Stephane Castelluccio's survey of Asian ceramics in late seventeenth and eighteenth century inventories, Dehua porcelain represented only a small portion of the Chinese ceramics in France but it was nevertheless an admired category. Writing in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, French journalist Guillaume Thomas Raynal noted its 'great beauty, whether solely for the brilliance of its glaze, or on examination of the bisque. This porcelain is valuable, quite rare, and little used. Its paste seems very short, and it has been possible to make only small vessels or figurines and magots with it. '5

Dehua figures of women similar to the examples in the Robien collection were widely popular throughout Europe in the first quarter of the eighteenth century and can be found in nearly every surviving European princely collection of porcelain.6 More than a dozen closely related figures of Chinese women overdecorated with red, black, and yellow paint and gold survive at Drottningholm Palace in Sweden (inv. FE 34-50). Originally purchased in the 1690s in the Netherlands for the collection of Queen Hedvig Eleonora (1636-1715), they were later used as architectural ornamentation in the Chinese pavilion built as a birthday present for Queen Lovisa Ulrika (1720-1782) in 1753.7 For color photographs of many of the closely related surviving figures within the Chinese pavilion's sumptuous interiors, see Göran Alm. Kina Slott, Stockholm. 2002. Three related figures of women, first catalogued in 1716, are preserved in the collections at Rosenborg Castle in Denmark.8

Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King in Poland assembled a collection of over twenty thousand pieces of Chinese and Japanese porcelain in Dresden in the early eighteenth century. This collection is important not only for its scale

(over 8,000 pieces survive in the collections of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden), but also for the extensive inventory done of the palace collection in 1721. The king owned more than 1,250 pieces of Dehua porcelain including at least eighty figures – some of them closely related to Robien's figures (see especially + II N4-N10). Interestingly, most are listed in the inventory chapter on Japanese 'dolls, pagodas, [priests], and other figures.' The largest figures measured over 60 cm high, the smallest only 12.5 cm.9

In addition to this figure and the Guanyin in FIG.149, the Robien collection includes a large overdecorated figure of a Chinese woman with a bird (1794.1.679.2 FIG.150) and a large overdecorated figure of Guanyin (1794.1.681.2).

FIG.151 Figure of a Guanyin carrying a newborn with two servants, China, 1690-1720; white porcelain, 24 x 11 x 6 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.682).



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**<sup>2</sup>** LEDDEROSE, 2000, p. 3.

**<sup>3</sup>** GODDEN, 1979, p. 263.

<sup>4</sup> CASTELLUCCIO, 2013.

**<sup>5</sup>** Cited in CASTELLUCCIO, 2013, pp. 163-164.

**<sup>6</sup>** AYERS, 2002, p. 30.

**<sup>7</sup>** SETTERWALL, 1972, pp. 159, 285. Colour photographs of some of the existing figures that adorned the luxurious interiors of the Chinese pavilion can be found in ALM, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> DONNELLY, 1969, p. 178.

**<sup>9</sup>** STRÖBER, 2002, p. 51. A transcription of notes dedicated to the porcelain works of Dehua in the 1721 inventory of the collection of Augustus II the Strong features in appendix 3 of DONNELLY, 1969, pp. 337–347.

#### **OVAL BOX** FIG.152

#### Restauration

Centre régional de restauration d'œuvres d'art, Vesoul, 2014

#### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Kung-Shin Chou, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2011; Jean-Paul Desroches, Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet, Paris, 2011.

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#### **Exhibitions**

Never exhibited

In the first guarter of the seventeenth century, Japan's self-imposed isolation from all but the Dutch and the Chinese, created a market in Europe for more easily accessible Chinese lacguer. But Europeans, who did not have access to high-quality lacquer made for elite markets within China, assumed that the less expensive wares widely available in Europe represented the pinnacle of what Chinese artists were capable of producing. Parisian marchand-mercier Edmé François Gersaint explored the European debate on Japanese and Chinese lacguer in one of his celebrated auction catalogues. In his sale catalogue for the collection of Angran, Vicomte de Fonspertuis, Gersaint cited several important late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century European authors who compared Chinese lacquer unfavorably to its Japanese counterparts. Gersaint's essay reinforced this widely disseminated stereotype that Chinese lacguer was not worthy of note.1 Yet, French collectors like Fonspertuis and Robien clearly had examples of both Chinese and Japanese lacguer in their collections. In addition to the numerous examples of superb seventeenth century Japanese lacquer in Robien's collection, he owned at least two more contemporary Chinese lacquer boxes (1794.1.759 and 1794.1.757).

Two types of Chinese lacquer were imported to Europe: carved and brightly pigmented lacquer (known in China as *kuancai* and as 'Bantam ware' or Coromandel lacquer in Europe) and flat lacquer decorated in black and gold (known as *miaojin* in China). Screens of both varieties were imported into France, where they were often cut up and repurposed to create wall panelling or used as decorative veneers for furniture. Parisian furniture maker Jacques-Philippe Carel salvaged panels from a seventeenth century Chinese carved and painted screen to create veneer for a superb commode.

Lacquer screens, cabinets, trunks, and boxes decorated in flat black and gold were produced and exported from China throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Louis Lecomte, a priest who participated in a French Jesuit mission to China in 1687, remarked on Chinese lacguer's admirable qualities and alluded to how it was manufactured. 'Two or three coats of varnish are all that is needed for tables and normal chairs... If one wishes to hide the wood, more coats are added so that, by the end, it has become like glass that one can use as a mirror. When the piece has dried, various figures are painted on it in gold, silver, or some other color and then - if so wished - it is covered with another light coat of varnish to give it a greater shine and preserve

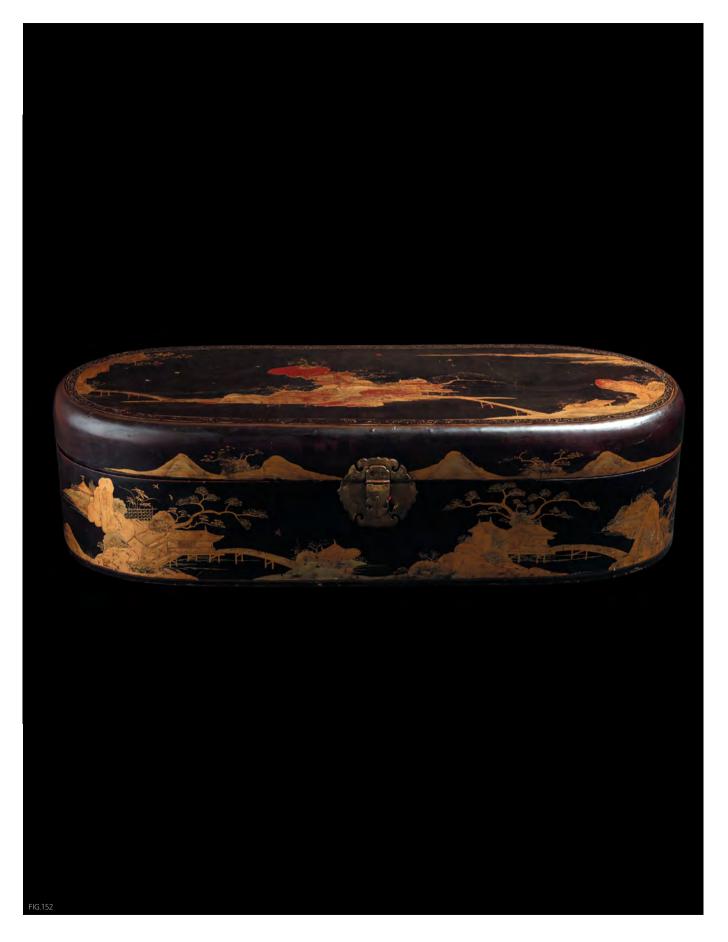
Lacquer produced specifically for export like this oval box from Robien's collection typically contains only two or three layers of lacquer. But even Chinese lacquer of lesser quality was superior to the 'japanning' Europeans produced because they did not have access to sap from appropriate trees. Recent analysis conducted by a team of scientists and conservators based at Winterthur Museum in Delaware, USA have determined that black and gold lacquer made in southern China in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was typically produced with sap from three species of trees, all of which are indigenous to Asia and are part of the Anacardiaceae family, Toxicodendron genus: Toxicodendron vernicifluum, Toxicodendron succedanaeun, and Gluta usitata.3 Artists in Guangzhou applied several coats of sap from these trees to a wood substrate, carefully polishing each dried coat to create lacquer's smooth, dense, black surface. To ornament lacquer in the miaojin technique, Chinese artists added line drawings to the FIG.152 Oval box, China, Guangzhou (Canton), Qing dynasty, prior to 1750; black lacquered wood with gilt and polished metal designs, 16 x 73.5 x 24 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.759).

lacquer surface using a tinted semitransparent lacquer. The piece would be left to slowly dry in a warm and moist environment which was essential for the lacquer to cure. When the lacquer was nearly dry, artists applied gold and silver powder to the surface; the powder adhered to the patterns outlined with the tinted lacquer<sup>4</sup>

The landscape scene on the lid of Robien's oval box features a rocky outcropping with low slung buildings and a variety of trees. The island, nestled within a lake, is connected to the shore by two bridges. A similar watery landscape surrounds the sides of the box. This type of pictorial decoration in gold is typical of lacquer produced in the early to middle of the eighteenth century. The scrolling borders which surround the landscape scene on the lid are found on many examples of eighteenth century Chinese lacquer exported to Europe. Similar borders frame the edges of each panel of a twelve-fold lacquer screen made in the 1720s for the Eccleston family, who were textile merchants in London (Peabody Essex Museum. F84093). The elaborate escutcheon and lock on this box were also made in China. Exposure to light damage has made the lacquer's surface chalky and more opaque than it would have been in Robien's time. Abrasions to the surface, particularly on the lid, have also revealed the red ground once underneath the gold powder.



<sup>2</sup> LECOMTE, 1990, p. 200.



**<sup>3</sup>** PETISCA, 2019, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

#### **TREMBLING STATUES** FIGS.153, 155, 156, 157

#### Restoration

Kerguéhennec regional restoration workshop, Bignan, 2006

#### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Jorge Welsch, gallerist, London-Lisbon, 2013; Kung-Shin Chou, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2011 (theatre characters sold after village shows); Jean-Paul Desroches, Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet, Paris, 2011.

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#### **Exposition**

Une des Provinces du rococo, la Chine rêvée de François Boucher, Besançon, musée des beauxarts et d'archéologie, 09.11.2019-02.03.2020.

Chinese artists in Guangzhou in the early eighteenth century made large quantities of unfired clay figures representing mandarins, merchants, labourers, religious figures, and characters from Chinese operas for sale as souvenirs to foreign merchants in Guangzhou. This tradition of sculpting figures for export likely emerged from the traditional practice of making ancestor portraits and figures of deities for use on house and temple altars in China. A set of one hundred watercolours illustrating different Cantonese professions includes an image of a Chinese sculptor creating one of these seated figures.

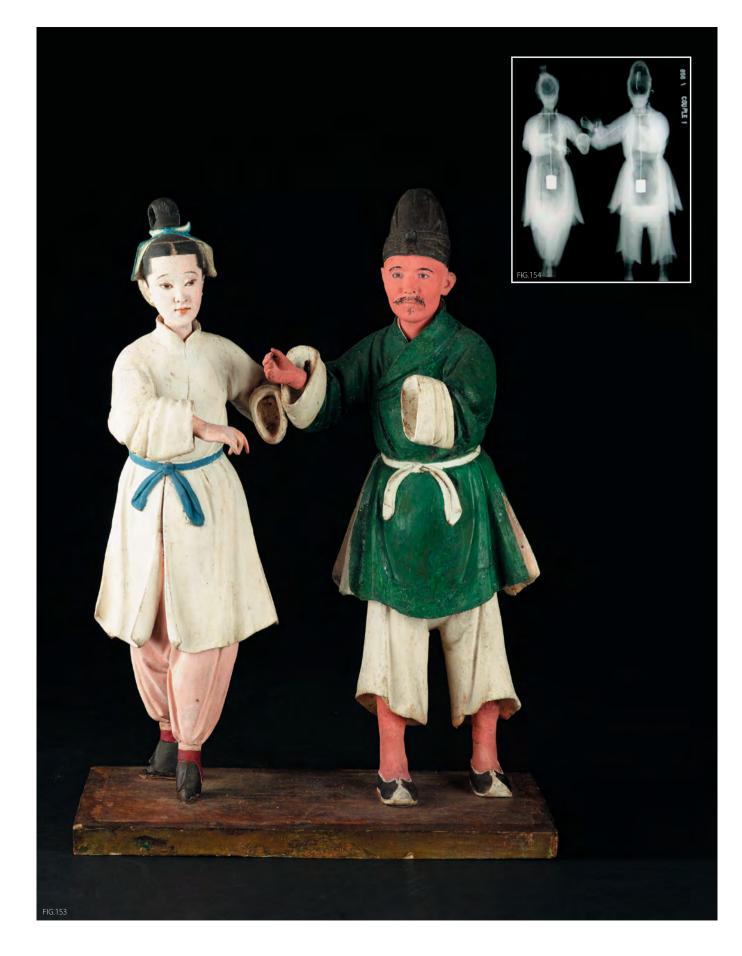
Surprisingly sturdy, these figures are made of unfired clay sculpted on a frame which is often made of wire or bamboo. The heads and hands of the figures were often moulded separately and attached. On many models, 'nodding heads' are attached to a metal rod with a lead weight and suspended on pins at the neck, allowing the heads to move freely when lightly touched. To create a smooth surface, the airdried clay figures were sometimes covered with a fine gesso-soaked paper. The surface was ultimately decorated with a thick, opaque watercolour; details such as human hair and ornaments made of glass and metal were sometimes added.<sup>2</sup>

A large, well-documented group of Chinese unfired clay figures was brought back in 1732 on the Kronprins Christian, first the first Royal Danish ship to venture to Guangzhou. The group includes a tableau of an old man and a boy on a platform (EBc210), standing figures of a Cantonese official and his wife (EBc245 and 246) as well as four seated portraits of the Danish captain and crew of the ship (EBc255-258)3. Each of the seated Danish figures is a distinct portrait of an individual, clearly modeled from life while the crew was in China. Similar portraits of Westerners were created by Chinese sculptors for Swedish, Dutch, English and American merchants in the eighteenth century.4

But Chinese figures were ultimately much more popular and widely produced for export to Europe. The collection of Queen Louisa Ulrika of Sweden (1720–1782) at Drottningholm included more than one hundred small unfired clay figures of Chinese male and female figures including mandarins and labourers, as well as

**FIG.153** Couple, China, Guangzhou (Canton), Qing dynasty, mid-18th century; crude clay bamboo (?), metal, wood, paint, human hair, glass beads, 37 x 12.6 x 11 cm (man), 35.5 x 11 x 11.5 cm (woman); the Robien Collection, Musée des beauxarts de Rennes (794.1.658).

FIG.154 X-ray photograph showing the inner framework and lead weights of the 'nodding heads', as well as the iron wire around which the fingers of the hands were shaped.



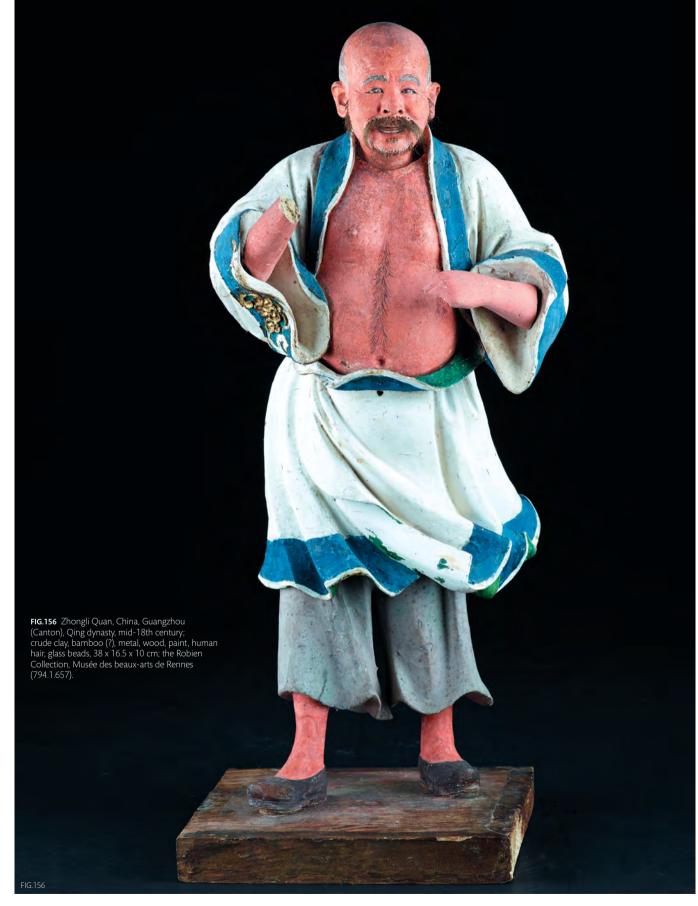
**<sup>1</sup>** STEVENS, 1989, pp. 135-136.

**<sup>2</sup>** SARGENT, 2012, p. 482.

<sup>3</sup> DAM-MIKKELSEN, 1980.

**<sup>4</sup>** A detailed list of these Chinese portraits of Europeans can be found in JACOBS, 2014, pp. 2–14.





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representations of Daoist Immortals. Together they represent a broad range of Chinese society with each occupation identified in both Chinese and Swedish on the accompanying stands.5

Not all figures were intended for royal collections in Europe. Unfired clay figures similar to those in Robien's collection are prominently displayed in a pastel portrait of Joan Jacob Mauricius (1692-1768), a former Dutch Governor of Suriname and an avid theatre lover. Mauricius's portrait also includes other works in his collection including a Japanese porcelain rooster and a Japanese lacquer box.

Chinese unfired clay figures were often optimistically and erroneously advertised for sale in Europe as representations of the Chinese imperial family. A 1726 auction in London included 'The Emperor of China and 6 Other figures,' and a sale in 1741 listed 'The Empress of China from the Life'.6

Robien, by contrast, was clear that the Chinese figures in his own collection represented the diversity of Chinese society, noting they included 'une nombreuse suite de figures de terres colorés extrêmement bien modelées représentant différents personnages, de vieillards, de femmes, d'enfants, de mandarins, de danseurs et artisans'.7 Two of the sculptures pair a Chinese man and woman together on the platform - the first pair (FIG.153) are workers, simply dressed in cotton clothing (1794.1.658). The second pair (FIG.157), with their more elaborate garments, are more prominent figures (1794.1.659); the woman, in particular, is depicted in a brocaded silk robe and wears a headdress with green, blue, yellow, and white glass beads.

The two standing male figures are likely mythological representations. A figure with a large, exposed belly (FIG.156), chest hair down to his navel, and robes in motion (1794.1.657) is likely Zhongli Quan. One of the eight Daoist Immortals, he is typically represented holding a large fan made of a banana leaf or feathers. Although the figure has suffered losses to his hands, the remnants of his arms appear as if he could have been holding such a fan. The elaborately clothed figure (1794.1.656) is more difficult to identify (FIG.155). With his characteristically long whiskers, he may represent Lü Dongbin, whom Zhongli Quan tutored to become an immortal.8 Regardless

of the sculptors' original intent, Robien likely thought of them only as Chinese figures. In addition to the unfired clay figural groups, the collection also includes two smaller painted figures made of papier mâché collected before 1740 (1794.1.654, 1794.1.655). Little is known about this especially ephemeral art form, but it is likely that similar figures were exported to Europe in the eighteenth century but have not survived (FIGS.158 and 159).

FIG.157 Couple, China, Guangzhou (Canton), Qing dynasty, mid-18th century; crude clay bamboo (?), metal, wood, paint, human hair, glass beads, 34.5 x 11 x 11.5 cm (man), 30 x 9 x 9.5 cm (woman); the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.659).



**<sup>5</sup>** SETTERWALL, 1972, pp. 300-306.

<sup>6</sup> A Catalogue of all the Rich Furniture... Late the Right Honourable the Earl of Peterborough's, London, 16 May 1726 (lot 5) and A Catalogue of Pictures Collected Abroad by Mr. Edmund Glover, London, 16-18 March 1741 (lot 93), cited in SARGENT, 2012, p. 492.

**<sup>7</sup>** ROBIEN, 1740.

<sup>8</sup> Thank you to Dr. William H. Ma for these proposed iden-





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#### HORSES

#### Restoration

Juliette Vignier-Dupin, 2005

#### Observations

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Kung-Shin Chou, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2011 (Chinese toys); Jean-Paul Desroches, Musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet, Paris, 2011.

#### **Bibliography**

BANÉAT, 1932, p. 137, nos. 8363-64 (China, sacred horse); BANÉAT, 1909, p. 442, nos. 4645-46; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 454, nos. 1546-47 (China, sacred horse); ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 278, nos. 813-14.

#### **Exposition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

Native to Central Asia, horses were used in China as early as the Shang dynasty (from ca. 1600 to ca. 1100 BC) to pull chariots in battle. Admired in China for their strength, speed, beauty, and intelligence, horses were widely depicted on scroll and wall paintings, carved in jade, and modelled in ceramics. The earliest surviving Chinese ceramic figures of horses were made as tomb sculptures, where they are depicted carrying riders, pulling chariots, and being used as pack horses.1

Sculptural ceramics like the horses in Robien's collection may have been made for use in China, but many were imported to Europe in the early eighteenth century. Augustus the Strong's massive Asian porcelain collection in Dresden included two closely related figures of horses. They were listed in the 1721 inventory of his collection in the chapter on 'Green Chinese' porcelain where they are described as' two neatly executed recumbent bridled horses with round holes in their backs, 6 inches long.'2 Ceramic figures of animals are included on many eighteenth century French inventories. Lions, elephants and dragons appear most frequently, followed by horses, monkeys, birds, and more rarely cats.3

The Robien horses appear as if they are just about to rise up on their delicately modelled legs. The body of each figure was created in a mould, but the mane, ears, tail, and harness were modelled separately and applied. After biscuit firing, each figure was covered in translucent coloured enamels known in China as susancai ('plain three colors'): their bodies in brown, the hooves in yellow, and the bases in green. The bridles and edges of the bases were left unglazed and painted red, a colour which the potters could not yet consistently achieve through enamelling.

Virtually identical models decorated with different patterns and glaze colors are preserved in the collections of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, the British Museum, Musée Guimet, the Fitzwilliam Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Peabody Essex Museum, as well as several private collections. A figure like Robien's likely served as the source for a Staffordshire soft-paste porcelain figure of a horse dating to about 1750 and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection.4

FIG.160 Pair of horses, China, Jingdezhen, Qing dynasty, 1690-1720; enamel-coated porcelain painted on biscuit porcelain, 12.5 x 13 x 4.5 cm (676 on the left), 11 x 11.5 x 4.5 (677 on the right); the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.676 and 794.1.677).

- 1 HARRIST, 1997, p. 17.
- 2 N4 #157 in the 1721 inventory of the palace's collection, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, p. 820. I would like to thank William R. Sargent for drawing my attention to this
- 3 CASTELLUCCIO, 2013, p. 106.
- 4 SARGENT, 1991, pp. 62-65.





#### ALBUM FEATURING A SERIES OF IMAGES ON TEA PRODUCTION FIGS.161 to 163

China, Guangzhou (Canton), Qing dynasty, mid-18th century; gouache watercolour on Chinese paper in an album covered with silk brocade, 27.7 x 25.2 cm; the Robien Collection. Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.617-1 à -26)

#### ALBUM FEATURING A SERIES OF IMAGES ON PORCELAIN PRODUCTION FIGS. 164 to 167

China, Guangzhou (Canton), Qing dynasty, mid-18th century; gouache watercolour on Chinese paper in an album covered with silk brocade, 27.7 x 25.2 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.616-1 à -26)

#### Restoration

Marie-Rose Gréca, 2003

#### **Observations**

Ching-Fei Shih, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2016; Jean-Pierre Drège, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, 2015; Kung-Shin Chou, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2011; Jean-Paul Desroches, Musée national des arts asiatiques -Guimet, Paris, 2005; Björn Tell, Lund University Library, Lund, 1999 (not after 1756).

## **Bibliography**

RIMAUD, 2019, no. 24, p. 78 (no. 617); COULON, 2006, p. 23; PETOUT, 1977, p. 28, no. 67; FRÈCHES, 1974; HUARD, 1962; BANÉAT, 1932, p. 136, nos. 8278-79 (China); BANÉAT, 1909, pp. 426-434, nos. 4563-64; ANDRÉ, 1876, pp. 413-436, nos. 1471-72 (China); ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 242-262, nos. 754-55.

#### **Exhibitions**

Une des Provinces du rococo. la Chine rêvée de François Boucher, Besançon, Musée des beauxarts et d'archéologie, 09.11.2019-02.03.2020; Les routes du thé, Musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet, Paris, 26.09.12-07.01.13; La soie et le canon, Nantes, Musée du château des ducs de Bretagne, 26.06.10-07.11.10; Cargaison de Chine, Lorient, Musée de la Compagnie des Indes, 06.02-11.02; Exotisme and voyageurs, Saint-Malo, Musée d'histoire, 07.77-10.77.

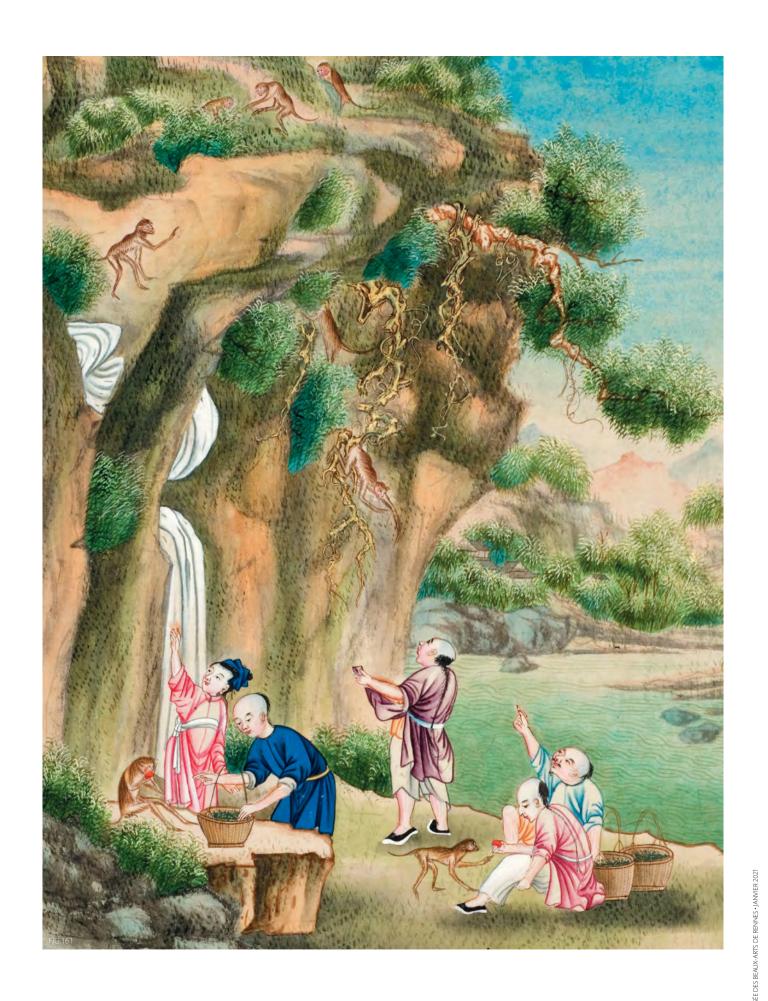
In the late seventeenth century, the Kangxi emperor commissioned Jiao Bingzhen to produce the Gengzhi Tu (Pictures of Rice Culture and Silk Culture), episodic sets of paintings depicting the most celebrated agricultural and industrial products of China. Widely reproduced in China as vertically-oriented woodblock prints, these images would later inspire artists in Guangzhou to produce watercolour albums for their European customers.<sup>1</sup> Two albums of Chinese paintings in Rennes feature related views of the production of porcelain and tea. They were likely part of the collection of Christophe-Paul Robien's son, Paul-Christophe de Robien (1731-1799), rather than his own, but they are sufficiently rare to warrant inclusion in this comprehensive catalogue. Paul-Christophe de Robien may have received the albums as a gift from his relative Pierre-Louis Achille de Robien (1736-1792), who was a merchant and official of the Compagnie des Indes in Guangzhou from 1767 to 1777.2

Chinese export albums such as these served as silent ambassadors to Europeans hungering for more information about this distant country. They provided glimpses into the Chinese landscape, views that would have been inaccessible even to European merchants in China, whose movements were highly regulated. But these albums were valued not only for their beauty, but also for the information they provided on Chinese commodities of particular interest in

Chinese artists working for foreign clients in the eighteenth century typically worked in gouache on paper. Gouache, a medium composed of ground pigment suspended in water, was favoured for its ease of application and the brilliant hues it produced. It is distinguished from watercolour by the addition of gum Arabic or lead white which saturates the color and makes the medium more opaque. Many Chinese export works on paper were painted on imported European paper, some of which was designed especially for use by the British East India Company in the high humidity of the tropics<sup>3</sup>. But the gouache paintings in the Rennes albums are executed on thin pieces of Chinese paper made from the paper-mulberry plant commonly known as miahlinzhi.

The Rennes paintings remain in their original Chinese accordion-style albums with cardboard 3 CLUNAS, 1984, pp. 45, 77.

FIG.161 The Book of Tea, Monkeys harvesting tea, fourth double-page (794.1.617-8).



<sup>1</sup> CAHILL, 2010, pp. 77-78.

<sup>2</sup> HUARD, 1962, p. 23.

covers wrapped in brocaded silk. The series is mounted in a Chinese format – from right to left. European collectors often rebound these sets, often replacing the original Chinese silk covers with lavish leather and marbled paper and reorienting the set from left to right.

The first album depicts many different stages in the production of tea. Made from the leaves of the camellia sinensis plant, tea was first imported to Europe from both China and Japan in small quantities in the early seventeenth century but the custom of 'taking tea' was not widely adopted until the 1680s. According to the Cuisiner royal et bourgeois, published in 1715, 'tea is not as common in France as coffee because of its high price[...] the ordinary manner of preparing it is to boil a pint of water in a clean vessel. You have a silver tea pot or one of the Chinese earthenware or in faïence, you put two pinches of tea in the pot and on it you pore boiling water." But by the mid-eighteenth century, tea was widely consumed in France. When the practice became fashionable, it changed the rhythm of people's daily lives and inspired them to acquire the necessary accoutrements for serving the drink. Chinese tea would go on to become one of the most profitable trade commodities for European traders in the eighteenth century.

The set of twenty-six paintings in Robien's collection includes images of cultivating tea plants, harvesting the leaves, and processing, packing, weighing, transporting and selling tea leaves. These scenes are included in multiple surviving 18th century albums, but the order in which they are presented and the precise selection of images varied widely. The first four paintings illustrate the advanced preparation of the landscape to cultivate tea shrubs, followed by three different views of picking tea. High quality tea plants in the mountainous regions of southern China often grew on cliffs, which are featured in a number of the early images in the album. The image of monkeys picking tea in painting 8 depicts a Chinese legend (FIG.161), rather than a specific step in commercial tea production. Da Hong Pao was a specific type of black tea produced from shrubs that grew in extremely inaccessible areas. By repute, these tea leaves were so challenging to harvest that they were picked with the help of monkeys. Among the most precious of teas, it was ostensibly reserved for imperial use.5

Like the view of monkeys picking tea, the bloody

scene in painting 9 is more apocryphal than episodic. It depicts 'Tea Horse Road,' a trade route used during the T'ang dynasty to trade Chinese tea for Tibetan horses. The merchants who navigated these dangerous mountain pathways were known as the 'Horse Clan'. In this scene, they are capturing wild horses running through a narrow passage and have slaughtered one, presumably to eat. This scene, included in several eighteenth century series on tea production, was often eliminated in later sets because its associations with tea would have been especially difficult for foreign audiences to comprehend.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the images in the Rennes album are annotated with references to specific types of tea. In the 'Forest of Tea' shop illustrated in 1794.1.617.20, Chinese merchants sell a variety of teas including baskets filled with 'White Hair' (tea made of young buds covered in white down) and 'Peak of the Great King' and 'Peak of Jade Maiden' (both black teas from Wuyi in Fujian province). A banner in the centre of the painting declares 'our shop often has various types of famous teas for customers' and, based on the inscriptions, the shop is selling tea from at least three different distributors including Pan Thencheng.<sup>7</sup>

Pan Zhencheng was from one of the most important merchant families in Guangzhou and a major supplier to French merchants. His name appears in the French East India Company records for the first time in 1753, but he was already supplying tea to other nations as early as 1750. For a decade, he stamped many of his official documents with four characters – xian pu yuan ji. Baskets of tea in three of the watercolours in this series are marked 'Xian pu' (1794.1.617.20, .22, .26). The scene in 1794.1.617. 26 may represent Pan Zhencheng's warehouse, which was located on a Guangzhou street near the foreign factories.8

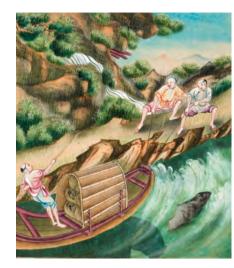
European merchants appear in three paintings toward the end of the series – tasting tea, supervising the sealing of crates and observing the final weighing of crates before their export. The wood-block print sets produced for Chinese audiences, which typically contained twenty-three paintings, did not include scenes depicting the sale of tea to foreigners so these images would have been added to the set by the artists in Guangzhou. Through viewing sets of paintings such as this, Europeans could acquire

FIG.162 The Book of Tea, from left to right and top to bottom: Transport of tea by waterway (794.1.617-19); Harvest of less accessible leaves using ladders (794.1.617-7); Women sorting and cutting the leaves (794.1.617-12); Unloading of baskets and tea tasting by European merchants (794.1.617-22); Fabrication of crates for international transport (794.1.617-21); Felling dead trees (794.1.617-2).

Several other vertically oriented eighteenth century albums of tea production survive. One of the earliest produced for the European market is an album of tea production with twenty images in Sweden. Listed on the 1777 inventory for the Chinese pavilion at Drottningholm, it may have been brought to Sweden in the 1750s in conjunction with the construction of the first pavilion (Choi. 1998. p. 518). An album with twenty-four images is preserved in the collections of Historic Deerfield, Deerfield, Massachusetts, US (56.428) Amanda Lange. Chinese Export Art at Historic Deerfield, Deerfield, 2005, pp. 65-77. Lange also cites an album with thirty-two images preserved in the Österreichisches Nationalbibliothek in Vienna and similar albums also sold at Christie's London on 6 April 1998, lot 259 and Northeast Auctions. Portsmouth, NH on 3 March 2002, lot. 773, An unpublished and disassembled album of 11 gouaches is preserved at Ingatestone Hall, Essex, England.10

a reasonably accurate understanding of how

Chinese tea was made, transported, and sold













**4** MASSIALOT, 1715, p. 382, in BAGDHIANTZ, 2008, p. 209.

**5** LU, 1974, p. 30.

**6** Correspondence with Tammy Hong, 17 August 2018.

**7** I am grateful to Professor William Ma for his assistance with these translations.

8 VAN DYKE, 2016, pp. 61-62 and xxvii.

**9** CHOI, 1998

10 Ibid, p. 518. An album with 24 images is preserved in the collections of Historic Deerfield, Deerfield, Massachusetts, US (56.428) Amanda Lange. Chinese Export Art at Historic Deerfield, Deerfield, 2005, pp: 65-77. Lange also cites an album with 32 images preserved in the Österreichisches Nationalbibliothek in Vienna and similar albums also sold at Christie's London on 6 April 1998, lot 259 and Northeast Auctions, Portsmouth, NH on 3 March 2002, lot. 773. An unpublished and disassembled album of 11 gouaches is preserved at Ingatestone Hall, Essex, England.

FIG.162

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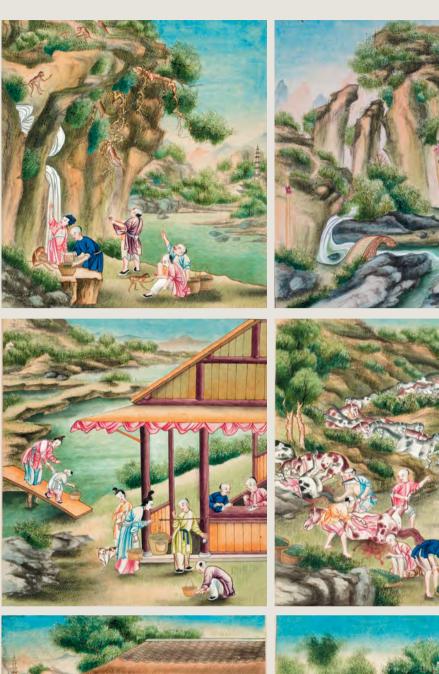
First spread (all right to left): Clearing animals away from tea shrubs. Cutting down old trees.



Second spread: Plowing the ground to plant tea shrubs. Preparing the ground to plant tea shrubs.



Third spread: Women picking tea leaves. Chinese merchants greeting each other.



Fifth spread: Tea Horse Road. A merchant buying tea leaves from women pickers.

Fourth spread: Picking inaccessible tea plants using ladders. Monkeys gathering tea.



Sixth spread: Men drying tea leaves. Women sorting and cutting leaves .

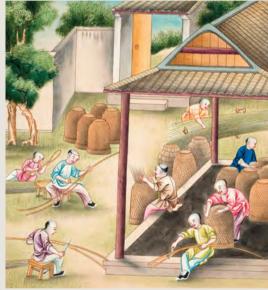
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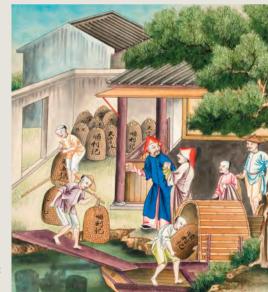




Seventh spread: Weighing tea. Roasting tea.



Eighth spread: Creating metal canisters for tea. Weaving baskets out of split bamboo fibres and hemp.



Ninth spread: Packing tea in baskets. Loading tea onto small boats.





Tenth spread: Transporting tea over water. Wholesalers buying tea in baskets.





Eleventh spread: Making crates for international transport. Emptying baskets and European. merchants tasting tea

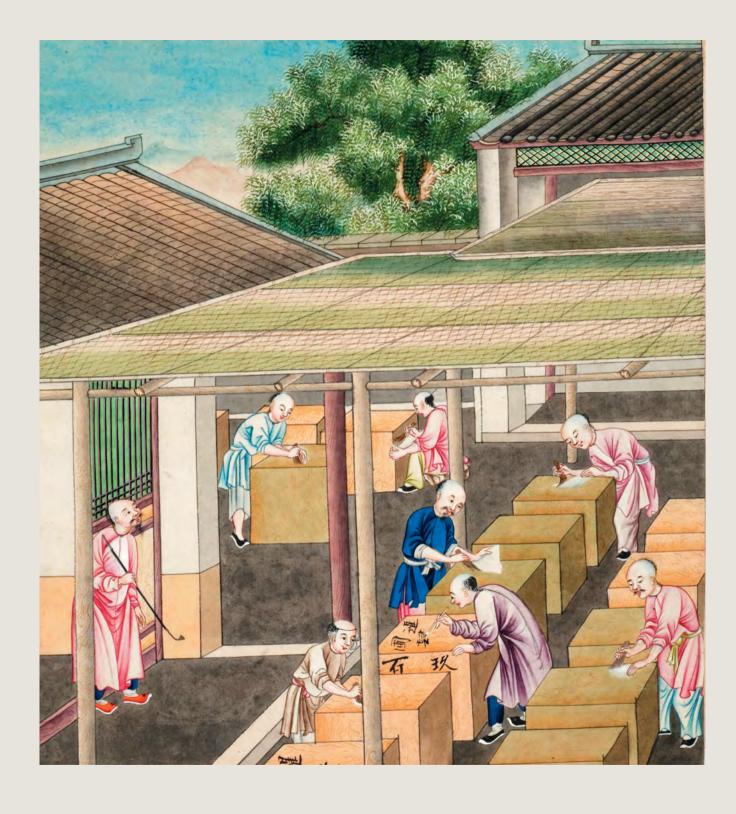




Twelfth spread: Packing tea into crates. Sealing tea in crates.



Thirteenth spread: Marking tea crates. Weighing packed crates.



The second album depicts all the steps in the production of porcelain, a Chinese invention that Europeans were unable to successfully replicate until the early eighteenth century. The vast majority of Chinese porcelain made for export was produced in Jingdezhen, the ceramics capital of the world, which was located in Jiangxi province. Unlike the series on tea production, which includes a number of European figures, this set does not. Because of the Chinese restrictions on the movement of foreigners in China, only a handful of foreigners were able to witness the process of porcelain production first-hand. French Jesuit Father François Xavier d'Entrecolles, who lived in China from 1698 until his death in Beijing in 1741, wrote two important letters on porcelain production in Jingdezhen to his counterparts in Europe. The first, sent in 1712 and the second, sent in 1722, offer the only firsthand European accounts of the process in the eighteenth century.11 Father d'Entrecolles confirmed that the division of labour at Jingdezhen was so extensive that as many as 70 workmen could be involved in the production of just one item. These bucolic and sparsely populated paintings give a sense of the multitude of steps involved in porcelain production but not of the scale of the industry nor the crowded, smokefilled city of Jingdezhen in the eighteenth century. In these paintings, the artist often illustrates multiple steps that would not necessarily have taken place in the same spaces.

Porcelain contains two types of clay – kaolin, a chalky white clay, and petunse, a harder type of greyish-white feldspathic clay. Six of the early paintings in the series illustrate the complex process of collecting and curing these two clays in preparation for making porcelain. Potters combined the two clays and then shape the mixture into forms, either by hand, in moulds, or on a wheel. Only wheel-thrown ceramics are illustrated in this series. The cogged wheel in painting 9 (FIG.164) is a kick wheel controlled by the potter himself. The wheel in painting 10 is powered by an assistant, who keeps it in motion by pulling on a rope.

After air drying, the pieces were typically painted with cobalt and then coated in a liquid glaze made of silica, a two-step process illustrated in image 12. Cobalt, used to produce the blue designs underneath the glaze, was first introduced to China from Persia in the fourteenth

century. Underglaze blue decoration was the most durable and least expensive method of ornamentation.

Images 13 (FIG.165) and 14 are out of sequence. Image 14 illustrates the creation of saggars, the covered containers of pre-fired ceramic made to hold and protect finer wares from too direct and intense a heat in the kiln. Image 13 shows the careful stacking of saggars in four beehive kilns prior to firing. Lesser-quality wares were stacked in the centre of the kiln with the saggars surrounding them to deflect the heat, which can reach up to 1200 degrees Celsius. The high temperature in the kiln permanently binds the kaolin and petunse, forming durable and translucent porcelain in the process. In images 18 and 19, artists apply overglazed enamels in diverse colours to the high-fired porcelain and permanently secure them to the porcelain by firing them in a lower temperature muffle kiln.

The complex and arduous process of packing and transporting ceramics from lingdezhen to Guangzhou is condensed in this series into only four images (22-24, 1). Ceramics for export were transported from Jingdezhen down the Yangzi River to Lake Poyang and from there onto the port cities of Guangzhou (Canton) and Xiamen (Amoy). The first scene in the series - likely meant to set the scene in China - illustrates a customs station at Poyang Lake on the route from Jingdezhen to Guangzhou. The final painting in the set illustrates the annual festivities in honour of Tong Bin, the god of fire whom Jingdezhen potters worship. Potters annually gift thanks to Tong Bin with sacrificial offerings and theatrical performances (FIG.166).

More sets of porcelain production survive than sets for tea production and at least seven eighteenth-century sets are documented. The earliest documented set, which is also the largest, is preserved in the Lund University Library in Sweden. This set of fifty watercolours, originally owned by Scottish merchant Colin Campbell, was purchased in Gothenburg in 1759. Campbell, one of the founders of the Swedish East India Company, likely bought them during trips to China between 1732 and 39<sup>12</sup>.





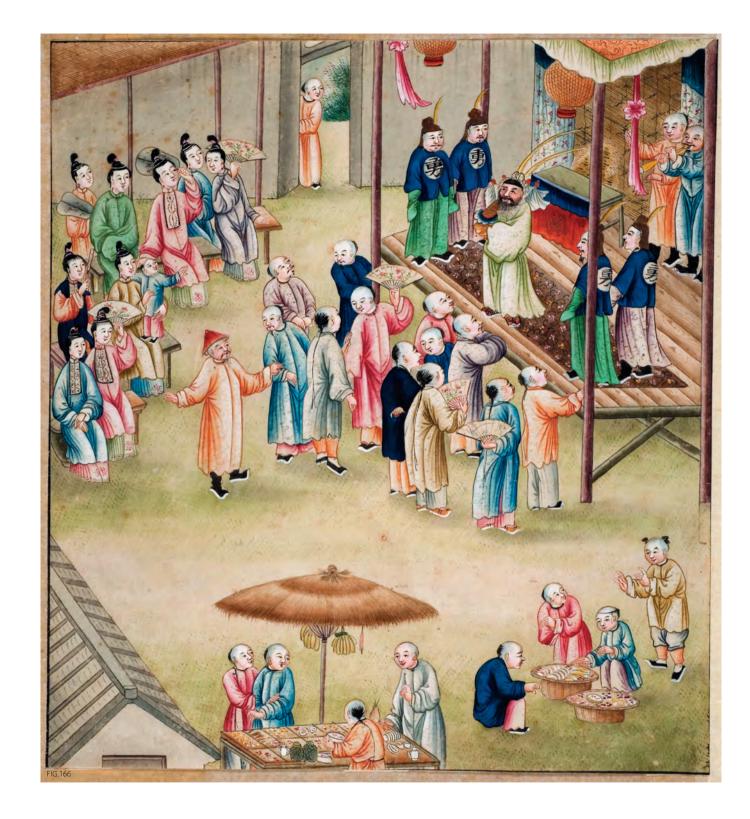
**FIG.164** The Book of Porcelain, Arranging the clay, throwing the porcelain, and drying the forms (794.1.616-<sup>10</sup>).

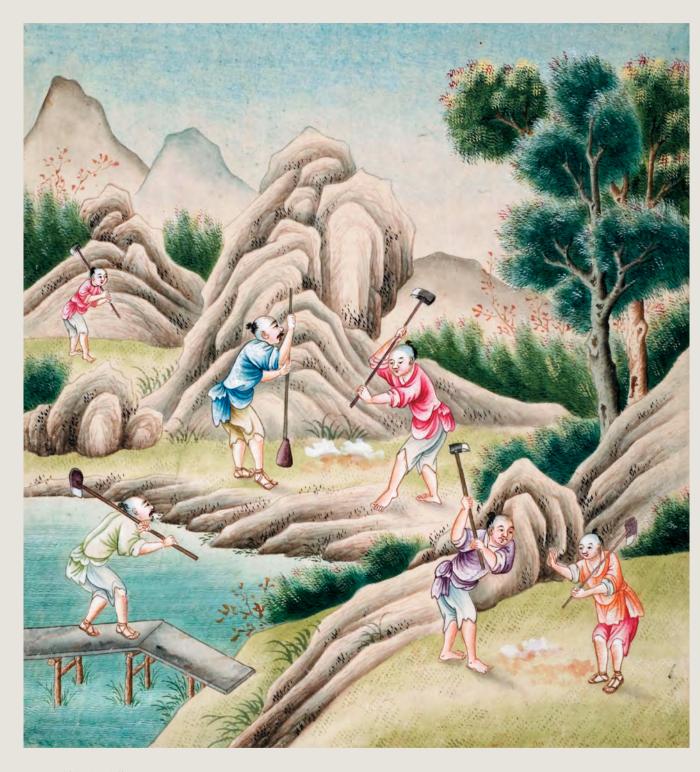
**FIG.165** The Book of Porcelain, *Saggar firing* (794.1.616-<sup>14</sup>).

**FIG.166** The Book of Porcelain, *Theatrical* performance in honour of the god of fire (794.1.616-<sup>27</sup>).

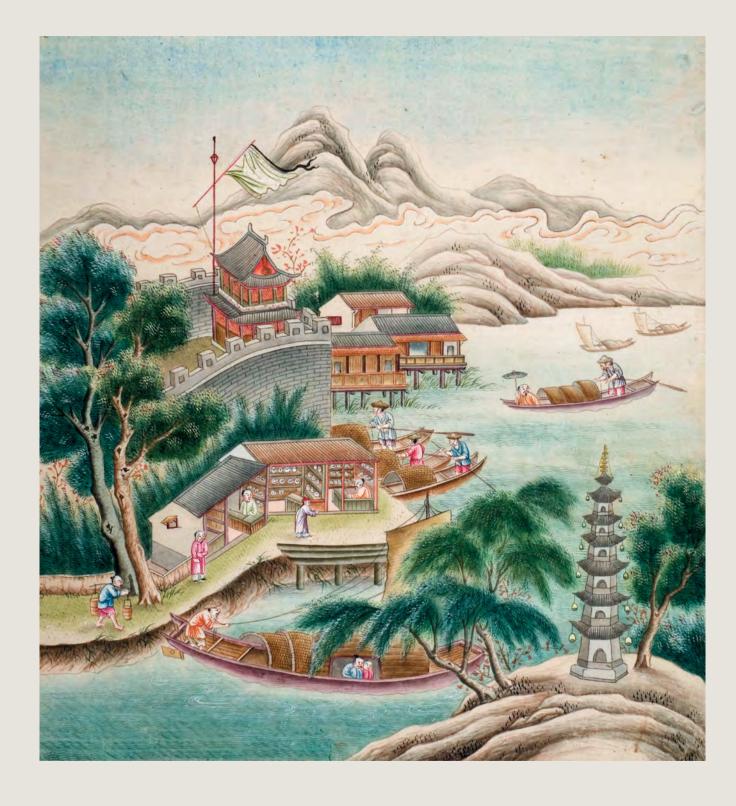


<sup>12</sup> DAHL, 1992. Illustrations from a similar series are conserved in the collections of the Hong Kong Maritime Museum in appendix 1 of HONG KONG, 2015, pp. 84–85. This appendix constitutes a very useful overview of series belonging to other collections. For numerous other albums dedicated to the creation of porcelain, see also LAM, 2004, pp. 21–24 and the website of the Guangzhou Museum of Art, www.gzam.com.cn/yi/w/info\_30.aspx?itemid=14798.





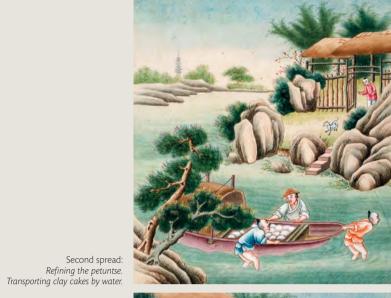
First spread (all right to left): A customs station at Poyang Lake, near Jingdezhen. Extracting the petuntse.







Fifth spread: Wedging the clay, throwing porce-lain, and drying forms. Turning and assembling porcelain.







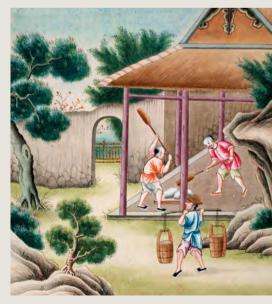






Sixth spread: Finishing forms on the wheel. Painting cobalt for underglaze blue designs and glazing.

Third spread: Buffalo kneading the petunse clay in basins. Rinsing and working the petunse.





Fourth spread: Mining the kaolin. Mixing kaolin and petunse.



Seventh spread: Loading the kiln with saggars [this image is out of order]. Assembling the saggars.



Eighth spread: Sealing the kiln. Firing the kiln.

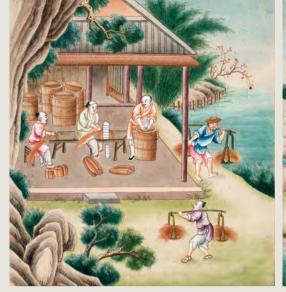


Ninth spread: Opening the fired kiln. Enamelling the fired porcelain.



Tenth spread: Firing enamels in a muffle kiln. More enamelling.







Eleventh spread: Low firing in an open kiln. Packing the porcelain.





Twelfth spread: Selling porcelain in Jingdezhen. Transporting porcelain to Guangzhou.





Thirteenth spread: Porcelain shops in Guangzhou. Theatrical performance in honour of the god of fire.

#### SCROLL CASE FOR INK CAKES FIGS.168 to 170

#### Restoration

Camille Schmitt and Tse-Han Wang, 2019

#### **Observations**

Geneviève Lacambre, 2015; Vadime Elisséeff, circa 1968 (Liu Chao-Meng, Song dynasty).

BANÉAT, 1932, p. 136, no. 8298; BANÉAT, 1909. p. 435, no. 4569.

#### **Exhibition**

Robien, l'homme et le collectionneur, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 01.72-08.72 (no catalogue).

This scroll-shaped ink case is quite a complex object, comprising a tubular container opening to reveal two rectangular receptacles where the ink cakes (no longer present) were placed, on which a piece of cardboard was enclosed that covered the ink and that is decorated with a small painting on silk satin of an insect and some flowers

In the right-hand side receptacle, a sheet presenting a xylographed text was discovered. The inscription extols the quality of the ink produced by the Wang family 汪, which follows the secret recipe of the Xi family 奚, from the Xiuning school 休寧 (Anhui), renowned for this speciality since the sixteenth century. The notice adds that the ink cakes in the case were very precious. The inscription is signed Wang Shimao 汪時茂 (n.d.), also known by the nickname Tianyi 天一, a producer of ink during the Era of Kangxi (1661-1722).

Once closed, the case acted as a support for a painting on silk satin depicting a landscape, which was wound around it. The painting has a colophon, two parallel verses, and the signature of Liu Henian 劉鶴年 (n.d.). Two round flat discs, made of silk ribbon wound around a sort of wooden button, are placed at the ends of the case, so as to simulate the thickness of a very long horizontal scroll wound around a baton decorated with a flat cap. The scroll is wrapped with a brocade cover, on which a strip with the title '蒼龍液' (canglongye) is placed, which is the name of the ink produced by Wang Shimao, probably originally contained in the case.

The scroll ink case conserved at the Musée de beaux-arts de Rennes is part of the collection of Chinese items later acquired by Paul-Christophe-Céleste (1731-1799), the son of Christophe-Paul de Robien (1698-1756), from his cousin who was based in Canton. His cousin returned to France in 1777, which establishes the terminus ante quem for the importation of

Ink cases, described in Chinese texts<sup>1</sup> with the terms 'cases for an assortiment of ink' (iiiin mohe 集錦墨盒) for the most precious among them, 'collection in [leopard] skin case' (baonang shi 豹囊什), or 'ink in a coffer of gems' (yaohanmo 瑤函墨), appeared during the Ming dynasty (1367-1644). In varied shapes, generally rectangular, they were used to showcase and protect the ink cakes contained within them. Several of these zither-, cash- or fan-shaped cakes could be found in one single case. These ink cakes, objects which have been collected since the tenth century, have been the subject of specialised publications since the fourteenth century; an infatuation for horizontally rolled ink cases emerged in particular among the educated of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911).2 Cao Sugong 曹素功 (1615-1689) describes ink cakes and their cases in his book Ink Forest of the Cao Family (Cao shi molin 曹氏墨林).3 The precise shape of the object studied here is not mentioned in ancient texts, and the term 'scroll case for ink' (shoujuan jijin mo 手捲集錦墨) is

Objects both coveted at the Manchurian court and given as gifts, ink cases would naturally have piqued the curiosity of Europeans, and it is probably due to its virtue as an unusual object that the case - which echoed the European 'book-box' - became part of Robien's cabinet. It is nevertheless probable that he had a keen interest in 'Chinese ink', a substance that was rare in Europe and sought-after for its incomparable

A very similar object to the one in the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes can be found among seventy scroll-shaped ink cases conserved at the Beijing Art Museum (Yishu bowuguan 北京藝術 博物館). This one comes from the workshop of another producer of ink in Xiuning, called Hu Kaiwen 胡開文 (1742-1808), one of the most important producers of ink in the Qing dynasty, who was active later than Wang Shimao. In this case, ten ink cakes of various shapes are arranged in the two receptacles (five in each),<sup>5</sup> which enables us to recreate the probable layout 6 LIN, 2007, p. 86.

FIGS.168 to 170 Case, Chine, Qing dynasty, reign of Qianlong, prior to 1777; cardboard tube around which a painting on silk containing a text and a painting on paper are rolled; cardboard, silk, paper, wood, scroll case (23.4 x 6.2 cm), paint on paper (22 x 5.5 cm), paint on silk (20.6 x 58.8 cm); the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes

of the ink cakes in the scroll-shaped case at the Musée de beaux-arts de Rennes.

Furthermore, very similar cases (containing Hu Kaiwen brank ink) were recently presented on the art market, 6 notably at the Xiling Seal Art Society (Xiling yinshe 西冷印社), which indicates renewed interest for this type of Chinese collectible today.



<sup>2</sup> WANG, 2002, p. 39.







<sup>4</sup> CHENG, 1619, p. 19

**<sup>5</sup>** HU, 2017, p. 108. LIN, 2007, p. 86.

# THE SLOW JOURNEY OF INDIAN PAINTING TOWARDS EUROPE 17th-18th CENTURIES

At the time when Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon, I discovered the collection of Indian miniatures of the Indian Museum of Calcutta (now Kolkata). The Mughal artworks, delicate, sculpted, dotted with burnished gold leaf and the Rajput paintings in 'clear lines' (klare lijn), with their intense and saturated colours fascinated me owing to their similarities, mutatis mutandis, with the art of the Italian primitives that I so admired in our Western museums.

This painting tradition was to remain terra inco*anita* for a long time both in France and in Europe. When, circa 1740, the President Robien (1689-1756) undertook the description of his recently acquired Indian miniatures, he became something of a pioneer among the collectors and enthusiasts

In 1489, as Vasco de Gama (1524-1597) navigated around the Cape of Good Hope, he opened up a maritime route to reach India. From the early sixteenth century, the Indian subcontinent was progressively colonised by European merchants. In 1510, the Portuguese conquered Goa and their commercial supremacy was to last over sixty years. The Mughal Empire was only founded in 1526. Clerics also arrived, Jesuit and Capuchin missionaries, who came to evangelise the country. Later the Dutch were to follow, who, in 1595, created the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindishe Compagnie, or VOC)

whose headquarters remained in Amsterdam. The English in turn founded in London the British East India Company (EIC) and based themselves in Masulipatam in 1611, in Surat in 1613, then acquired the Fort Saint-George (Madras) on the Coromandel Coast. The Danish. in 1620, established their base in Tranquebar (now Tharangambadi), and in 1664, at the initiative of Colbert (1619-1683), France created a shareholding company, the French East India Company. The French in turn obtained commercial privileges and bought land for their trading posts, a lodge in the port of Surat in 1666, then, in 1674, they obtained a concession at Pondicherry. India would long remain a country that was little known or visited, however, a few travellers reported stories that fuelled the imagination of young people avid for adventures. One of these early tales was that of Father Pierre Du Jarric (1566-1617), a Jesuit who collated the letters and accounts of the first missionaries to travel in the Southeast Asian peninsula. Nevertheless, from 1601 onwards. individual initiatives by Breton sailors existed. Born in Laval, François Pyrard (1578-1623) left the port of Saint-Malo for India, in the company of merchants. Upon his return, he published the story of the many adventures and dangers traversed, which remains one of the earliest French accounts. Later, François de la Boullaye-le-Gouz (1623-1668) roamed India at the time of Shah Jahan (1592-

1666). But the book that was met with great success in the seventeenth century was that of François Bernier (1620-1688), a philosopher, disciple of Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), and erudite, who. driven by his curiosity, criss-crossed India for over eight years and was a guest at the Mughal court in his capacity as a doctor. His lively story, rich in anecdotes describing in detail life at the time of the Emperor Aurangzeb (1618–1707), was republished and translated into several languages and assuredly awakened vocations and stimulated interest in this civilisation. In the same period, lean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605-1689), a great French traveller and pioneer of trade with India, left a long and detailed tale of his wanderings within the context of his activities as a trader of precious stones. The paths of the two erudite travellers were to cross, incidentally, when they visited the Taj Mahal.

Most of the merchants undertook these long and arduous journeys, mainly motivated by the lure of riches. It was in Hindustan or the Indo-Gangetic Plain, the northern part of India occupied by the Mughal, that most of the exchanges took place because a solid administration existed and the Europeans were received there at court. The English jeweller William Leedes worked in the service of Akbar (1542-1605), while Augustin Hiriart (circa 1580-1632), a military engineer and jeweller from Bordeaux, created the throne of Jahangir (1569–1627) in the early seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> The jewellers found in India the means for a very lucrative trade, since the negotiation of precious stones led to fast fortunes, transforming them into veritable nabobs on their return to Europe. This was the case of Elihu Yale (1649-1721), an Irishman who forged an immense fortune in India. The posthumous sale of his assets, in 1721 in London, notably including Indian art objects and miniatures,2 was to last more than eight days. He left a donation to Yale that enabled the creation of the famous American university. Another jeweller, Jean de Thévenot (1633-1667) was, according to

to evoke Indian pictorial art: 'One sees in India a number of paintings on paper and on card, but almost all are crude, and only those made in Agra and Delhi are held in esteem: however as those of Agra are for the most part indecent, and represent lascivious postures that are even worse than those of Aretino, there are few honest people of Europe who purchase them.'3 The European merchants were looking for precious and rare products, mainly spices (Cochin cinnamon, pepper, incense, coffee, tea), textiles (silks, cottons, chintz, cashmeres, carpets), indigo, amber, saltpeter, and opium. They showed little interest for the arts and particularly for painting that had only brought them marginal profits. However, a curious collection exists of nearly one hundred and forty-two naive paintings entitled Codex Casanatense 1889, conserved in Rome. It was long considered Portuguese owing to annotations in this language inscribed on many of the pages. Jeremiah Losty was able to demonstrate that it was indeed the work of an Indian artist, created in circa 1540, a genuine early work, in the region of the sultanate of Mandu or in Gujarat.4 This unicum, which describes aspects and customs of Indian life in the manner of the Company paintings that enjoyed great success in the nineteenth century, was donated to the Casanatense Library in Rome, via Lisbon, purportedly by Dominicans in the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> The introduction of Indian documents into Europe started slowly and initially concerned manuscripts. The Vecchietti brothers. Gioambattista and Gerolamo, who came from Florence, knew Arabic and Persian and undertook, from the late sixteenth century, several voyages in the Orient, visiting Egypt, Persia, and India to acquire books, including some that were destined for Pope Clément VIII (1536-1605).6 Pietro Della Valle (1586-1652), a Roman aristocrat who visited India in the 1620s, also collected manuscripts but always without

the account of his travels, one of the first authors

<sup>1</sup> BASTEAU, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> SCARISBRICK, 2014, pp. 208-221.

**<sup>3</sup>** THEVENOT, 1684, p. 113.

<sup>4</sup> LOSTY, 2014.

**<sup>5</sup>** ARCHER, 1992, pp. 12–13.

<sup>6</sup> RICHARD, 1980, p. 293.

<sup>7</sup> SUBRAHMANYAM, 2012, p. 177.

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In France, under the reign of Louis XIV (1638. 1643–1715), a certain number of manuscripts entered royal collections at Colbert's initiative. Wishing to stimulate research and the study of foreign languages, he sent language researchers to the Orient to acquire historical, scientific, or religious texts for the enhancement of the Royal Library. The guest for illustrations was not a priority but occasionally several miniatures would happen to be in a book. This was the case, for example, of two little books that Nicolas Fouguet possessed (1651-1680), in which five Mughal miniatures were included, which had no relationship to the handwritten texts.8

In reality, the paintings of high quality, the magnificent illuminations, the work of the best miniaturists, performed by the painters of the imperial workshop (kitab khana), were exclusively created for the emperor and members of the imperial family and were not accessible to foreigners. Bernier, a rare favourite who frequented the court, was able to declare: 'in painting and in miniatures, I have also seen such beautiful, fine, and delicate pieces that I admired them.'9 The artworks that curious visitors could acquire in the city, at the bazaar of Delhi, were, as Thévenot emphasises, paintings done rather quickly and of a lesser quality: 'They apply themselves to representing stories and we see in many places the battles and victories of their princes, rather well painted [...] but since the workers earn little, it is certain that they do not apply themselves to their work with the accuracy that they might otherwise, and they think only of doing a lot of hard labour in order to deliver it without delay and earn money to live on.'10

It is these Mughal paintings, in a rather 'provincial' style, that were acquired by the rare enthusiasts seduced by the novelty of these compositions. We find them in rather large quantity in Amsterdam, going by the mentions of isolated artworks or those brought together in an album, appearing in catalogues of sale and inventories from the midseventeenth century in the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup> They

arrived there through the commercial relations maintained with the Mughal Empire. Rembrandt (1606-1669) was one of the very first enthusiasts. As an artist and connoisseur, he immediately identified the best works and acquired several miniatures that he reproduced using a quill, brown ink, and washes. To date, twenty-three of these copies are known to exist. 12 The painter's eye, fascinated by foreign cultures, was attracted to these compositions and characters with their exotic costumes. During the seventeenth century and in the early eighteenth century, these Mughalstyle images were exported in great quantity by the negotiators and agents of the VOC, from the west of Deccan, via the Port of Surat or from the Coromandel Coast, via Machilipatnam, most often destined for Amsterdam.

From there, painted pages and albums were distributed throughout the whole of Europe. These same modest Mughal miniatures, often in a grevish wash (nim galam), sometimes slightly enhanced with colour, were inserted within intricate panelling in 1767 for the decor of the Millionenzimmer ('Millions Room') at Schönbrunn Palace near Vienna. at the request of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria (1717-1780). Nonetheless, this propagation remained limited in comparison to the 'Turkeries' and other oriental objects that appeared in European interiors following the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, which had placed Westerners in direct contact with the Ottoman Empire.13

The discovery of faraway lands and new worlds, and the expansion of trade that increasingly intensified saw the emergence, over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of a taste for curiosities. Eclectic collections multiplied, not only among princes and nobles, but also among the bourgeois, academics, scholars, and erudite of Europe. This infatuation for artificialia and naturalia from all walks of life, often attested to a pedagogical motivation; many of these collections were

to become the treasures of future museums.14 This phenomenon can be observed in Florence with the collections for didactic purposes of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Francesco I de' Medici (1541-1587) and his successors, who assembled antiques, portraits, coins, medals, weapons, scientific instruments, art objects in hard stone, Chinese porcelain, and natural history cabinets. This humanist spirit of the Renaissance spread across all of Europe, for instance at Ambras Castle, near Innsbruck, where the collection, founded by Ferdinand II. Archduke of Further Austria (1529-1595), was later augmented by the Wunderkammer ('Room of Marvels') of Albert V. Duke of Bavaria (1528-1579). In these object collections, the weapons always played an important role (Rüstkammer, 'Armoury'), whether they were ceremonial arms, polished and damascened, or more exotic weapons, Mughal rondaches (dhal), Turkish helmets, African lances, or Malaysian kris. In Madrid, Philip II of Spain (1527-1598) collected, besides a vast library and numerous paintings, extra-European objects deriving from his colonies of America or the Philippines. His nephew, Rudolf II (1552-1612) King of Bohemia and Hungary, brought together a prodigious collection at his Hradcany Castle in Prague, in which artworks or ethnographic objects were combined with rarities of nature, objects from Gujarat in pearl, Chinese porcelain, scientific instruments, and monstrous creatures. The wealthy Danish scholar Ole Worm (1588-1654) knew Latin and Greek, and possessed a collection of rare Runic manuscripts. He travelled and visited many of these European collections that were often open to curious minds, as was that of Robien in his day, the president of the Parliament of Brittany. Upon Worm's return, he came up with the idea of creating his own museum for the students of the University of Copenhagen, where he held the chair of medicine. Besides artworks, he assembled products of nature, taxidermied and fossilised animals,

of Frederick III (1648-1670). The latter enriched the Kunstkammer initiated by his father and oriented it more towards objects of curiosity deriving from the Ottoman Empire, but also India, China, Japan, the New World, Africa, and Greenland, as well as mineralogical and conchological collections. 15

The magnificent collection of precious objects gems, ivory, gold and silver work, and jewellery - assembled by Frederick Augustus II of Saxony, known as 'the Strong' (1670-1733), in Dresden in the Grünes Gewölbe ('The Green Vault'), includes an exceptional work by the goldsmith Johann Melchior Dinglinger (1664-1731), La Cour du Grand Moghol Aurangzeb. This rather quirky representation, of somewhat Turkish-Chinese inspiration, presents on a silver and gold platform in baroque form over a hundred figurines adorned with enamel and precious stones. The work attests to the fascination that India held in the early seventeenth century. A major patron, Augustus II the Strong also owned, at his palace the Residenz, albums of portraits of Mughal sovereigns. 16 In Italy, one of the very first collections of Mughal paintings was that of Pope Urban VIII (1568-1644), né Maffeo Barberini. The Album Barberini, a series of individual portraits, is conserved at the Vatican Library. 17 It contains a painted genealogical tree of the Mughal emperors and several studies and incomplete artworks. It was likely brought back by a Catholic priest residing in Agra - possibly the Jesuit Francesco Corsi (1573-1635), a Florentine like the pope. 18 Curiously, during the eighteenth century and even beyond, these artworks were labelled as Chinese although all of them date from pre-1630, from the time of the Emperor Jahangir. The preparatory sketches were part of the collection of the imperial workshop, and since they were studies, they were sold to a foreign visitor.

In India, the second half of the seventeenth century was hardly favourable to the development of pictorial art, since Emperor Aurangzeb, a highly orthodox Sunnite, had little interest in art and many of the painters left Delhi and the palace in search of other patrons. Furthermore, from the middle of

and multiplied exchanges with other collectors

and scholars. Upon his death, the Wormianum

Museum was incorporated within the collections

<sup>8</sup> See Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Persan 97 and Persan 98.

<sup>9</sup> BERNIER, 2008, p. 250.

<sup>.</sup> 10 THEVENOT, 1684, pp. 135-136.

<sup>11</sup> LUNSINGH SCHEURLEER, 1996, pp. 211-230.

<sup>12</sup> SCHRADER 2018

**<sup>13</sup>** STRZYGOWSKI, 1923; DUDA, 1983, vol. 1, pp. 268–275, vol. 2, pl. 464–473.

**<sup>14</sup>** BBAZIN, 1967, pp. 55-80; IMPEY, 1985, passim

<sup>15</sup> DAM-MIKKELSEN, 1980, p. 131, EDc103 and EDc104 (Indian miniatures, called 'Japanese'!).

<sup>16</sup> KUHLMANN-HODICK, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> KLIR7 1967

<sup>18</sup> SUBRAHMANYAM, 2012, p. 259, note 56.

his reign, the emperor moved his court, staying for a long period in Aurangabad, with the ambition of conquering the Deccan sultanates. There, between 1678 and 1686, the Venetian Niccolò Manucci (1638-1717) commissioned an album, Storia del Mogol, a series of portraits copied from originals belonging to the imperial collections. All of these paintings are in the Golkonda style. 19 In 1686 and 1687, when Aurangzeb successively controlled Bijapur and Golkonda, the painters from these courts soon found themselves idle after the fall of their sovereigns. Turning to the travellers who were circulating in the Deccan, they prolifically produced these series of dynastic portraits. These series were appreciated since the theme remained familiar for Westerners interested in history and for whom, for a long time, the collections of coins and medals featuring the effigies of Roman emperors, the series of etchings of kings, queens, famous men of war, or illustrious personalities in literature or the arts, were already traditionally the subjects of collections. Hence the portraits of Mughal emperors, Deccan sultans, princes, and other important Indian figures soon became mass-produced for the European clientele, judging by the amount of copies that still subsist today in so many museums (and private collections) worldwide. There are numerous examples found in Paris (Bibliothèque nationale, Musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet), London (Victoria and Albert Museum, British Museum), Amsterdam (Rijskmuseum), Vienna (Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek), Dresden (Kupferstich-Kabinett), Saint Petersburg (Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library<sup>20</sup>), etc., and the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes, which owns a few works belonging to President Robien's collection.

The small number of Golkonda portraits that Robien acquired, probably in Saint-Malo upon the return of a ship, were carefully studied in 1997 by Madeleine Perriot.<sup>21</sup> She identified all of the figures and compared them to other similar copies. The level of craftsmanship varies since a

great difference exists between the contemporary figures, Shah Raju (1593–1681) and Abul Hasan Qutb Shah (1600–1699), of much higher quality to that of a retrospective portrait such as that of Jahangir, copied profusely, a kind of 'bazaar painting' designed for external trade. In France, at about the same period, among the Marquis Jacques-Louis de Beringhen's (1651–1723) widely diverse collection of over ninety thousand engraved portraits of all origins, he owned an album, *Modes estrangères enluminées*, of thirty comparable portraits from the Deccan.<sup>22</sup>

In Italy, in the seventeenth century, in the lineage of the lords of the Renaissance, the tradition of humanist and intellectual curiosity was perpetuated.23 This universalism was no stranger to the contribution of the Jesuit missionaries, notably Portuguese, in the collecting and collating of extra-European artworks. In Milan, Manfredo Settala (1600-1680), a passionate scholar and collector, travelled to the Orient and created his own museum, one of the most famous in Europe. He possessed many objects, lacquerwork from Japan and porcelain from China, whose production secret he wished to discover (as did all of Europe at the time, multiplying attempts at imitation). His collection also included Indian textiles and shawls, daggers from Agra with jade handles, pearl objects from Gujarat, and an album of Mughal calligraphies. In Bologna, the Marquis Ferdinando Cospi (1606-1686) had his Museo Cospiano, full of Chinese porcelain and manuscripts, Hebrew texts, and pearl objects from Goa: while the scholar Lorenzo Magalotti (1637-1712) owned art objects from Africa and South America, European bronzes, medals, ivory pieces, scientific instruments, curiosities, marvels of nature, and Egyptian mummies.

In the same period, the figure that stood out as the most important admirer of Indian painting was Count Abate Giovanni Antonio Baldini (1654–1725). This scholar and diplomat, from a rich and noble family from Piacenza (duchy of Parma), travelled extensively in Europe. In Lon-

don, he became a member of the Royal Society and met Isaac Newton (1642-1727); in France he was acquainted with James II (1633-1701), in exile at that time: in Madrid, he collected classical cameos; in Amsterdam, he passionately accumulated Indian and Far Eastern artworks that were found there in abundance. Close to the highly eclectic approach of Christophe-Paul de Robien, he also collected many manuscripts, etchings, medals, coins, seals, ornithological collections, and a vast library including many books dedicated to travel and to the Orient. His collection was dispersed after his death but a scholar, Antonio Vallisneri (1661-1730), a naturalist from Padua and himself a collector of oriental objects, established the catalogue, published in 1722.24 He described in its pages several bronzes from Bengal, several portrait albums of Mughal sovereigns (fig. 5),25 eighteen paintings of fakirs and penitents, as well as several dozen paintings of portraits of Mughals, kings, officials, and ministers, along with representations of festivities, combats, weapons, and other customs, bearing on the reverse side the explanatory inscriptions of those who had brought them back to Europe. Baldini opened up his collection broadly, which was well known to academics. Several of his miniatures were engraved by Bernard Picart (1673-1733), a Parisian draughtsman and engraver living in Amsterdam, to illustrate the fifth volume of the Atlas Historique devoted to the Mughal Empire, published by Chatelain.26 In Italy, Baldini's exceptional Indian collection had no equivalent, nor did it survive for posterity.

In London, at his residence in Chelsea, Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753), a doctor, naturalist, and doubtless the greatest collector of his age, possessed a cabinet of curiosities and a quasi-ency-clopaedic collection (natural history, ornithology, numismatic, cameos, manuscripts, and an exceptional library of forty-two thousand volumes). He

undertook a voyage to Jamaica where he studied hundreds of plants, harvested cocoa, and invented chocolate milk. His tremendous collection, which he bequeathed to the nation, formed the basis of the British Museum. He did not go to India but its miniatures, including a sixty-seven-page album containing a series of *dashavatara*<sup>27</sup> and portraits from the Deccan, very comparable to the works owned by Robien, were probably acquired in the Netherlands.

Amsterdam in the seventeenth century and into the mid-eighteenth century effectively remained the nerve centre of the trade in Indian art. Among the Dutch enthusiasts, there were those who made their first acquisitions on site, such as Nicolaes Witsen (1641-1717), mayor of Amsterdam and director of the VOC, who owned over four hundred and fifty Indian miniatures, including a fine album of Golkonda portraits;28 or Simon Schijnvoet (1653-1727), a collector and landscape artist, whose several miniatures were engraved to serve as illustrations for the reference book on Asia Oud en nieuw Oost-Indie by Francois Valentiin (1666-1727).29 Similarly, Adrianus Canter Visscher (1707–1782), who was posted in Machilipatnam and, on his return to the Batavian Republic, acquired modest Indian miniatures portraits and genre scenes - which were copied to illustrate the long text that he wrote on the Mughal dynasty and the situation of the VOC on the Coromandel Coast.<sup>30</sup> However, other Dutch nationals who spent time in India were to bring home paintings directly and, in some cases, had portraits made of themselves painted by Indian artists. This was the case of Cornelis van den Bogaerde (1640-1690), represented on two high-quality miniatures dating from before the fall of the Golkonda Sultanate and that have recently re-emerged<sup>31</sup> or Johannes Bacherus (1642-1693), an emissary of the VOC to Emperor Aurangzeb, who appears several times on

**<sup>19</sup>** HUREL, 2010, vol. 1, pp. 38-40 and pp. 156-166, cat. 226 (1-54).

<sup>20</sup> Originating from the Suchtelen collection, a family of Dutch origins living in Russia.

<sup>21</sup> PERRIOT, 1987 (however 794.1.585-5 represents Dara Shikoh and not Shah Jahan).

**<sup>22</sup>** HUREL, 2010, vol. 1, p. 27 and pp. 170–173, cat. 234 (1–30).

<sup>23</sup> LIGHTBOWN, 1969.

**<sup>24</sup>** Ibid., p. 268, note 79 and pp. 273-277.

<sup>25</sup> One of these albums is now conserved in Paris, BNF, Département des manuscrits (Smith-Lesouéf 233 rés.); another in London, Victoria and Albert Museum (IM9-1912).

<sup>26</sup> CHATELAIN, 1720, volume V, pp. 110-116, pl. nos 36-44.

**<sup>27</sup>** See British Museum, 1974, 0617, 0.2.1-67.

<sup>28</sup> LUNSINGH SCHEURLEER, 1996, pp. 167-249.

**<sup>29</sup>** ZANDVLIET, 2002, no. 62, pp. 122–123. **30** LUNSINGH SCHFURI FFR. 2016

<sup>30</sup> LUNSINGH SCHEUKLEEK, 2

**<sup>31</sup>** KRUIJTZER, 2010.

a very large painting on cloth, in a more naive style, created in 1689;<sup>32</sup> or again, in 1711, of Joan Joshua Ketelaar (1659–1718), ambassador of the VOC, who travelled to Udaipur to meet Maharana Sangram Singh II (1690–1734) and received several large paintings in the Mewar style, in memory of the receptions organised in honour of this first visit from a European.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the circulation of Indian miniatures still remained exceptional. While Indian painters had access, from the early sixteenth century, to religious engravings distributed by Christian missionaries, Europe only became aware of Hindu painting and its mythology very belatedly. Practically only the Mughal artworks (of 'provincial' or 'bazaar' style) reached the European collectors since the subjects - portraits, hunting scenes, fortress sieges, palace meetings - were not of a nature to perturb rational minds. However, the discovery of the Hindu pantheon was far more surprising. Once again, the Marquis de Robien distinguished himself through his curiosity and even audacity, since, prior to 1737, he acquired painted series - mainly avatars of the god Vishnu (dashavatara), various aspects of the Devi, and representations of the three Gymnosophists - which he classified in the ethnographic section of his collection.

François de La Boullaye-le-Gouz (1610–1668) in the account of his travels published in 1653, evoked the *Ramayana* and several protagonists from this epic tale – Rama, his brother Lakshmana, his wife Sita, or the monkey Hanuman – and described therein other gods of the Hindu pantheon: Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha, Krishna, etc. Four plates of woodcuts, in the popular style, illustrated his book.<sup>34</sup> His knowledge was likely acquired from a Brahman in the temples of South India where the profusion of narrative sculptures and bas-reliefs may have inspired his compositions.

In the milieu of art lovers and scholars of Amsterdam, a city renowned for its booksellers and

publishers, books by ancient authors were in circulation – Ludovico di Varthema (1470–1517) or Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1563–1611) – illustrated with eminently fantastical etchings from the Hindu pantheon.<sup>35</sup> Finally, Abraham Rogerius (1609–1649), a Calvinist who spent time in South India and learned from Brahmans his knowledge of Indian religion and customs, in his book *Open Door to the Secrets of Heathendom*, described Hinduism with some accuracy.

German missionary Heinrich Roth (1620-1668), the author of the first Sanskrit grammar composed by a European, also made illustrations of Hindu gods on his travels in India. Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680), a Jesuit residing in Rome and famous for his encyclopaedic mind, did not have direct experience with these distant lands but gathered information and objects, on missions to Syria, India, and China in particular. The Museo Kircheriano has a significant ethnographic collection.36 Kircher learned several languages, studied religions and advocated Egypt as the locus of their dissemination. He was interested in Hinduism and metempsychosis. In 1667, in his book China monumentis, written in Latin and translated into French in 1670, he described the ten main avatars of the god Vishnu, which he illustrated with drawings by his friend Heinrich Roth.<sup>37</sup> These incarnations in which the god, endowed with several arms, appears under the appearance of a fish (Matsya), a boar (Varaha), a tiger (Narasimha), or a tortoise (Kurma), made an impression and were among the first images of dashavatara to gain recognition.

The humanist Olfert Dapper (1636–1689) did not leave the Netherlands, but wrote extensively on distant lands such as India or Africa.<sup>38</sup> His fascinating copper engravings, interpretations by a Western artist freely inspired by a series of *dashavatara* derived from the collection of Sir Hans Sloane,<sup>39</sup> were interspersed throughout his writings on Hinduism.<sup>40</sup> These highly elaborate illustrations recall

the no less surprising etchings, adapted to Dutch taste, in the book by Philippus Baldaeus (1632-1672), a protestant pastor who entered the service of the VOC and visited South India, where he learned Tamil. His documented study<sup>41</sup> on Hindu religion and mythology had a great impact, as he was the first to bring the epic tales of the Mahabharata and Ramayana to a wide audience. Today, he is suspected to have plagiarised a treatise on Hinduism by the Portuguese Jesuit Jacopo Fenicio (1558-1632), a study from 1609 founded on knowledge of the Puranas.42 His text was purportedly translated into Dutch by the painter Philip Angel (circa 1618-1664) who joined the VOC in 1645 and, during his stay in India, acquired an authentic series of Vishnu avatars. 43 Bernard Picart copied these miniatures for Baldaeus's book. The imitation was respected, but the addition of perspective and volume in the Western style confers a hybrid character to these copies. 44 However, Picart delivered a number of other 'Indian' plates for the illustration of a vast Traité des cérémonies religieuses de toutes les nations. Since he did not always have access to Hindu mythological artworks, but to accounts that were sometimes beyond fantastical, he was thus able to apply his unbridled imagination to them. 45

Such 'exotic' native painting long remained rare in the West. The first known example in England is the *Ragamala* album, donated in 1640 by William Laud (1573–1645), Archbishop of Canterbury, to the Bodleian Library. <sup>46</sup> Dating from 1600–1620, the 'Laud *Ragamala*' (fig. 10), was commissioned by Abdul Rahim Khan-I-Khana, a provincial noble and head of the Mughal armies. A *raga* is a poetic musical composition; a *ragamala*, or 'string of *raga*', the pictorial transposition of musical modes, evoking feelings, atmospheres, or seasons, in a series of highly codified paintings. Despite the strong Hindu connotation, with the presence of Krishna, Brahma, or Shaivite ascetics, this refined and poetic art was nevertheless adopted by the

Muslim courts and flourished in the eighteenth century in the Rajput kingdoms and in Hindustan and the Deccan.

India experienced a new wave of European adventurers during the eighteenth century. After the merchants came civil servants, often cultivated young people of scant fortune, who embarked for India in the hopes of a better situation. In her Mémoires, Madame Roland (1754-1793) evokes the case of one of her suitors. Pahin de La Blancherie (1752-1811) who, deprived of resources, went to India: Roland herself had thought about it, but her health would not have permitted it. Many, both in France and the United Kingdom, decided to improve their station in life in this way. This was the case of the Knight of the Royal and Military Order of Saint-Louis, Jean-Baptiste Gentil (1726–1799), who, while a member of the gentry, was not the eldest son and as such could only choose between religious governance and a military career. He left in 1752 and fought the English under the orders of Jean Law de Lauriston (1719-1797), before serving in the army of the Marquis Bussy-Castelnau until the fall of Machilipatnam, in 1759. Having learned the language of the country, he was able to enter the service of Shuja ud-Daula, nawab of Awadh. In Lucknow, and later in Faizabad, notwithstanding his role as a military advisor, Gentil was passionate about this country and accumulated numerous books, manuscripts, and albums of paintings (muragga). Upon his return, he offered his many precious documents to the king. This collection formed the initial core of the Indian collection of the Bibliothèque nationale. It was based on this generous gift that in France, finally, researchers and scholars were able to gain access to sufficient materials for the study of Indian civilisation, languages, religions, history, geography, architecture, numismatic, mythology, as well as, of course, the Mughal or Deccan miniatures, and were able to do so for a very long time. This story was not unique. Among this new

**<sup>32</sup>** Now conserved at the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam (A 9584), see repr. in JACKSON, 2004, pp. 80–81.

**<sup>33</sup>** ZANDVLIET, 2002, pp. 123–126, no. 63.

**<sup>34</sup>** LA BOULLAYE-LE-GOUZ, 1653, chapters XI to XIV, pp. 163–178, pl. pp. 162, 170, 173, and 176.

**<sup>35</sup>** MITTER, 1977, pp. 16–29 and pp. 50–70.

**<sup>36</sup>** LIGHTBOWN, 1969, pp. 248–249.

**<sup>37</sup>** KARCHER, 1992, pp. 12–13.

<sup>38</sup> For several years now, a museum in Paris dedicated to African art has adopted the name of Dapper.

**<sup>39</sup>** Voir *supra*, note 26 and STOLTE, 2012, part. I, pp. 72–75, and part. II, figs 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, and 21.

**<sup>40</sup>** DAPPER, 1672, pp. 86–96 and 136–137.

**<sup>41</sup>** ALDAEUS, 1672.

**<sup>42</sup>** MITTER, 1977, pp. 297–298, note 277.

**<sup>43</sup>** Conserved at the Norbertine Abbey of Postel-Retie, in Belgium, see STOLTE, 2012, part. II, pp. 105–217, figs. 1–2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20; see a comparable series in HUREL, 2010, vol. I, pp. 186–187, no. 254 (1–8).

**<sup>44</sup>** MITTER, 1977, pp. 66-67, figs. 29-30: Rama and Lakshmana fighting against Ravana.

**<sup>45</sup>** CÉRÉMONIES, 1735: vol. I, part II, pp. 167–179, pl. nos 37–44.

**<sup>46</sup>** STOOKE, 1953, pp. 30–31, pl. VII (*Asavari Ragini*); SEYLLER, 1999, pp. 257–263.

generation, often animated by the spirit of the Enlightenment, Gentil became friends with Abraham Hyacinthe Anguetil-Duperron (1731-1805), an Orientalist scholar, who embarked on a long journey in search of Zend and Pahlavi texts for his work on Zarathustra. Doctors, engineers, civil servants, or military personnel connected with foreign companies also arrived and were committed to residing in India, sometimes for long periods. Their education led to their interest in civilisation, art, and often to studying the languages of this new country. When Captain Mahé de La Bourdonnais (1699-1753) took control of the Fort of Manara (later, Mahé, named after its conqueror), he returned with a statue of Vishnu, the very one found in Robien's collection.47 Lally-Tollendal (1702-1766), who was called back to France after his bitter military failures, brought back in his luggage an album of popular paintings from South India. 48 The Marguis de Bussy-Castelnau (1718-1785), who fought the English in the Deccan, learned Tamil there and owned miniatures from the Hyderabad School. Among the civil servants of the India Company, one of the most interested in Indian culture was possibly Abraham Porcher des Oulches (1765 †). For several years, commanding the peaceful trading post of Karikal, he studied Tamil, the Hindu religion, its myths and epic tales, which he had translated, then illustrated with hundreds of gouaches by artists from Thanjavur and Andhra Pradesh and bound into four great volumes.49 It was his son-in-law, the Count of Modava (1725-1777) - author of the thrilling Mémoires on Bengal - who brought these albums back to France. Antoine Polier (1741–1795), a Swiss engineer and advisor to the nawab of Awadh, was often in friendly rivalry with the Colonel Gentil in their quest for miniatures and manuscripts. Polier spoke Urdu and was interested in Persian, Sanskrit, and history. After a long period of research, he obtained a copy of the Vedas, sacred texts of Brahmanism that he offered to the British Museum. He was a friend of Claude Martin (1735-1800), a

collector of scientific objects, manuscripts, and a benefactor of Lucknow, and also of the General de Boigne (1741–1830) who served Madhava Rao Scindia (1730–1794) and returned to France with a number of Indian paintings and objects.

Similar companionships existed in the British colony and there were, sometimes, between these little societies of exiled intellectuals and connoisseurs, cordial relations or fruitful exchanges with the French, since they all shared the same passion for the country, its culture, history, religions, languages, and art. But after their defeat to the English and the fall of Pondicherry in 1761, many French nationals returned to their homeland. At that time, then, notably in Paris, albums and manuscripts brought back by the military of the Compagnie des Indes were in circulation.

The 1780s were conducive to the formation of new collections. The inexorable decline of the Mughal Empire led the members of the imperial family to part with some of their assets. British civil servants and administrators took advantage of the many opportunities that arose. Leaving his post in 1768. Lord Robert Clive (1725-1774) returned to England with a host of precious objects and several miniatures.50 His successor, Warren Hastings (1732-1818), Governor General of Bengal, who spoke Bengali, Urdu, and Persian, was also a collector and exerted a degree of influence among the cultivated colonels of Calcutta, Murshidabad, Lucknow, Faizabad, or Patna. His assistant Richard Johnson (1753-1807), a learned scholar, brought together a collection of over one thousand miniatures, now conserved at the British Library.51 Sir William Jones (1746-1794), judge at the court of justice of Calcutta and a talented linguist, learned Persian and Arabic at Oxford, then studied Sanskrit and translated La Reconnaissance de Shâkountalâ by Kālidāsa, the Indian Shakespeare. 52 In 1784, with Johnson and the support of Hastings, they founded The Asiatic Society. In Calcutta, Sir Elijah Impey (1732-1809), head of the court of justice of Bengal, a friend of Hastings since their studies at

Westminster, collected miniatures from the schools of Lucknow and Murshidabad, while his wife, Lady Mary Impey (1749–1818), employed indigenous artists to create large watercolour illustrations of natural history, flowers, birds, and other exotic animals.

Among this intellectual elite, there was also John Baillie (1772-1838), who served the East India Company then was a professor of Arabic in Calcutta; his collection is now found at the library of the University of Edinburgh; Charles Wilkins (1749-1836), translator of the Bhagavad-Gita; Dr William Fullerton (1754-1808), a scholar, collector of miniatures, and surgical doctor of the Company in Bengal and Bihar, who acquired beautiful works thanks to his good relations with Indian nobles; Captain Archibald Swinton (1731-1804), a Scottish surgeon who served under Lord Clive in the Karnataka campaign and lost a hand in the combat. Gifted for languages, he met Colonel Gentil. His collection of miniatures and manuscripts sold in 1810 and, after various misadventures, are now found in Berlin; 53 Colonel Colin Mackenzie (1754-1821), whose significant collections of drawings (notably Jain manuscripts), coins, and sculptures enhanced the British Library, the British Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum; or Captain Richard Plowden (1743-1830), a British officer to the nawab of Lucknow, and his wife, Elizabeth Sophia Plowden (1751-1834), who was a pioneer in her interest for Indian music and who commissioned illustrations by local painters for the music and songs that she was intent on collating.54

In the field of art, France is no match for the United Kingdom, which, owing to its long colonial past, took from India the most significant art collections, many of which were derived from these former residents of India. The first paintings from Rajasthan, long unknown, were brought back by James Tod (1782–1835), a historian and the author of the Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan that Benoît de Boigne was familiar with (1751–1830). His collection was acquired in the Rajput kingdoms of Bundi, Jaipur, Jodhpur, and above all in Udaipur, from

Maharana Bhim Singh (1778–1828). He gave it to the Royal Asiatic Society (RAS) of which he was the first librarian. The Pahari gouaches from the Himalayan kingdoms only made their appearance in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But the finest imperial pages were diplomatic gifts, such as this masterpiece of Mughal art, the *Padshahnama*, a present, in 1799, from the *nawab* of Awadh to the governor Lord Teignmouth (1751–1834), for King George III (1738–1820).

The collection of Indian miniatures belonging to the Marquis de Robien, a provincial magistrate, isolated in his beloved Brittany, constitutes a contribution to the French collections that is not inconsiderable. This erudite man of letters is worthy of our admiration, as a polyvalent collector and lover of graphic art (he possessed over a thousand works by the greatest Italian, French, and Nordic masters) who conducted research into this modest ensemble of Indian origin and who professed for the habits, religions, rituals, and customs of the most diverse peoples, those most distant in time and space, such a keen and profound interest.

**<sup>47</sup>** ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 377.

**<sup>48</sup>** HUREL, 2010, vol. I, p. 32 and vol. II, pp. 28–35, cat. 294 (1–100).

**<sup>49</sup>** HUREL, 2010, vol. I, pp. 30–32 and vol. II, pp. 36–91, cats. 296–299.

**<sup>50</sup>** ARCHER, 1987.

**<sup>51</sup>** FALK, 1981, pp. 14-29.

**<sup>52</sup>** BARNARD, 2004.

**<sup>53</sup>** HARRIS, 2001.

**<sup>54</sup>** FRASER, 2017, pp. 84–85, nos. 36–37.

**<sup>55</sup>** HEAD, 1991, pp. 154-163.

**<sup>56</sup>** BEACH, 1997, pp. 46–47, no. 14.

#### Foreword

The 'book painted in Patna which represents all the divinities' acquired by President Robien originally contained thirty-four miniatures. All are from the same hand, painted onto Indian paper of the same format (H. 26 x L. 20 cm) with a crimson red border. This album was taken apart and the works were mounted onto card and stored in boxes. To bring a certain unity to the collection, eleven other miniatures from various origins were stuck onto sheets of the same size and framed with borders in the same colour, probably from the eighteenth century onwards.

#### Observations

Samuel Berthet, historian, Delhi, 2019; Rila Mukherjee, Hyderabad Central University, 2017; Manonmani Filliozat-Restif, Direction des Archives départementales de la Marne and Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat, a specialist in Indian culture, 2017; Kévin Le Doudic, doctor of history, 2016; Nathalie Bazin, Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet, 2015 (identification of characters); Prasad Tare, art historian, Savitribai Phule Pune University, 2015; Marta Becherini, Columbia University, New York, 2014; Mireille Lobligeois, École Française d'extrême Orient, Paris, 1987; Madeleine Perriot, École du Louvre, Sorbonne Université, Paris, 1985.

### **Exhibition**

Miniatures indiennes de la collection de Robien, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, 10.01.80-02.03.80.

# SERIES OF FOURTEEN FIGURES FROM

India, Bihar, Patna, ca. 1730; gouache enhanced with gold and silver, 26 x 20 cm (paper), 21 x 15 cm (miniature).

#### Bibliography

ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 213–215, 220–224, and 226–227, nos. 713-1-4, 13, 15, 18–20, and 29–33; ANDRÉ, 1876, pp. 379–381, 387–391, and 394–395, nos. 1421-1-4, 13, 15, 18–20, and 29–33.

# N° 1 Balarama at rest next to the serpent Ananta, after his battle against the asura (FIG.171)

Inscriptions on the back: 'Casta or parabaram first principle among all according to the pagans / he created the other gods to take care of the universe and is resting / between the folds of a garter snake with several heads' and, in Devanagari.\*\* 'Parashnath-shaya-naga' Inventory: 794.1.581-1

In a clearing, on the edge of a river, a man lies asleep on cushions, with his bare head resting on his folded left arm. He is dressed in a red loincloth, and his legs, slightly bent, are lying on a yellow cushion. He is wearing bracelets and a long pearl necklace. He is entirely surrounded by the body of a long snake, whose multiple heads are erect behind him, forming a protective canopy. Finally, thirty decapitated heads of men are arranged in such a way as to form a large circle around the scene.

The iconography of this miniature is extremely rare, perhaps even unique, and remains problematic. In the museum's catalogue from 1868 to 1876, Auguste André (1804–1878), basing his opinion on the inscription on the back, initially mentioned Parabrahman, the eternal being without beginning or end that contains everything within it; he later rejected this hypothesis, as this supreme figure may not be represented in any form. He instead saw in this reclining figure, lying under the protection of a many-headed snake, the god Brahma lying at rest after having created humanity. This remains unconvincing as Brahma is not associated with a snake.

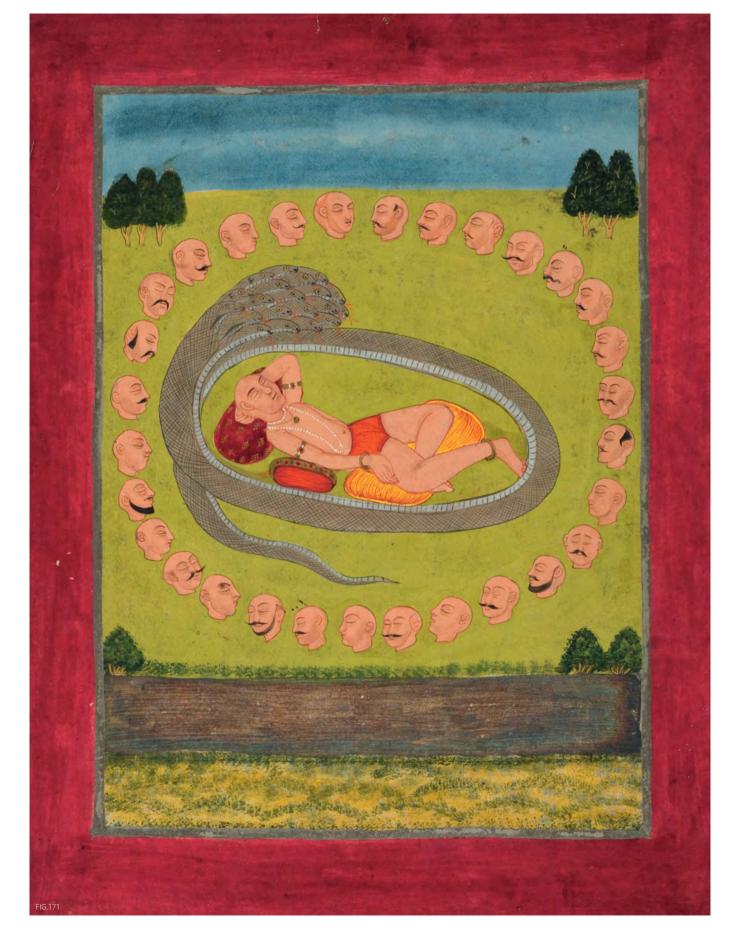
If we take into account the Devanagari inscription on the back of the painting, it would seem to be Parshvanatha, that is, the second to last of the 24 *jinas*, or masters of the Jain religion, who attained omniscience. This twenty-third Tirthankara, a

historical figure who lived in around the eighth century BC, is traditionally represented as being protected by the serpent Dharanendra, whose many heads provide a hood around his head. In addition, in Bihar, where this miniature comes from, there is an important site for Jain pilgrimage, Shikharji, where a temple is dedicated to the Jina Parshvanatha. But once again, this identification would not be retained because the thirty decapitated heads that surround the figure at rest are in total contradiction with lainism, a religion that promotes non-violence (ahimsa), compassion, and respect for all living beings, right down to the very smallest. It is not unusual to see a Jainist monk with a broom, ready to sweep away any insect he might step on, or wearing a mask to avoid swallowing one accidentally.

In the end, the consensus is that this reclining figure represents the god Balarama, resting under the protection of Ananta, the multiheaded cobra. Balarama, also known as Baladeva, Balabhadra, Samkarshana, and Halyudha, is Krishna's elder brother and the eighth incarnation of the god Vishnu. Balarama is an ancient Brahmanic divinity, associated with strength, agriculture, and irrigation when he is armed with a plough (hala) and a pestle (FIG.173). Balarama is also associated with snakes, because he represents the terrestrial form of the naga Ananta (or Shesha), whose coils formed a bed for Narayana (another of Vishnu's names) while he was sleeping on the waters of the cosmic ocean

It seems that this rare image illustrates a brief episode from an equally rare manuscript, written in Hindu by Lalatch Kab, an author from the sixteenth century, and translated by Théodore Pavie (1811–1896).<sup>2</sup>

'Balarama stood in the middle of the Yadava army ready to defend it – all the enemy chiefs were following Hari's chariot, and Balarama goaded their army with his cries – And when he saw that all the enemies were following after him, he shouted out: "I will kill them all now, before one hour goes by!" – The heroic leader of the Yadavas prepared to fight; the heads that he cut



<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Jeremiah Losty, and I would like to thank him for having deciphered the Devanagari inscriptions on the backs of several miniatures, which were clumsily and imperfectly written. Old spellings have been modernised. Unless otherwise stated, all handwritten inscriptions are pen and brown ink

**<sup>2</sup>** BHAGAVAT, 1852, p. 220.

off formed a circle on the ground around him. – And then, beside himself with fury, Balibhadra struck each *asoura*, one after the other with his pestle; – Samkarchana-Rama knocked down the enemies with a ploughshare; the blows he gave them with his pestle broke them in two. – The souls of the *asouras* were suffering from the agony of their death throes; and that is how he fought, Yadava.'

This text, the Bhagavat Dasam Askand, is in a dialect or vernacular tongue (bhaka) and is a more concise and accessible version containing a few variations from the Brahmanic Purana, originally written in Sanskrit. In this combat, Balarama was fighting for his brother Krishna (Hari), the prince of the Yadavas, who had kidnapped Rukmini. Rukmini's brother Rukmin and his allies fought in vain against Balarama (Balibhadra-Samkarchana-Rama), the leader of the Yadavas, to get her back.

#### N° 2 Brahma

Inscriptions on the back: 'Broumha one of the three great divinities of the pagans / he presided over the creation and birth of all things'; and in Devanagari: 'Barama'

Inventory: 794.1.581-2

Brahma, the four-headed god, is sitting on a large lotus, sheltered by a small pavilion (*chhattri*). One of his four hands is holding a sacrificial ladle (*sruk*), with which he is stirring up a fire, while the other is holding a rosary (*akshamala*). A Brahmin is to the right. He is wearing the sacred thread (*yajnopavita*) as a belt, and his hands are placed together in a sign of respect (*anjali mudra*). As creator of the universe, Brahma is one of the forms of the *trimurti* and represents the balance between Vishnu that preserves the world and Shiva that destroys it. His four heads look out over the four directions and symbolise his omniscience, the four castes, and the four Vedas, of which he is the guardian.

#### N° 3 Brahmin

Inscriptions on the back: 'Figure of a Brahmin or minister of idols / in ceremonial clothes holding the books of his religion under his / arm'; and in Devanagari, under his arm: '81 / lag jha (?) / ri chandra / bhagal'

Inventory: 794.1.581-3

In the centre, a Brahmin is standing in left-facing profile, projected against the background of a landscape, while to the right, there is a

one-storey building. The Brahmin is holding a manuscript under his left arm and seems to have a torch in his hand. He is dressed in a long, saffron-coloured *dhoti* that is printed with red floral motif. He has a mark of sectarian affiliation (*tilaka*) painted on his forehead. The Brahmin belongs to the first and most prestigious of the four castes. He studies the Vedas, and his role is essentially sacerdotal.

#### N° 4 Sarasvati

Inscriptions on the back: 'The goddess Soursatty who incessantly travels the world / carried by a goose. The pagans invoke her when they are / impotent and believe that she can give them vigour or increase / their vigour for knowing women'; and in Devanagari, one illegible and scratched out word and 'Saravatia', and in red, 'Sarasata'

Inventory: 794.1.581-4

In a landscape with a few trees, and on the right a small pavilion (*chhatri*), the goddess Sarasvati is seated in profile on her mount, often a peacock but here a goose (*hamsa-vahana*), which is heading to the left. The goddess of wisdom, knowledge, and the arts, married to Brahma, is holding her symbolic instrument, the *vina*, which has two chambers and is decorated at both ends with a bird's head.

#### N° 5 Ravana

Inscriptions on the back: 'The god Rauna is depicted with several heads and / several arms. He is also called Ramram, as they / say, two times god. The pagans greet each other / by saying his name'; and, on the lower right, a red line drawing of a lioness (?).

Inventory: 794.1.581-13

Ravana is seated on a hexagonal *pitha*, facing forward. He has one thousand heads and as many pairs of arms, but is traditionally depicted with ten heads, here topped with a crown from where a gazelle emerges (more often a horse's head). Each of his ten pairs of hands is armed – with sabres, but also lances, *khanjar* (dagger), and *katar* (a typically Indian, double-handled push dagger). He is wearing a saffron-coloured *dhoti*, knotted with a red sash (*patka*), while a white scarf (*dupatta*) with a leaf motif is draped over his shoulders. Ravana, the king of Lanka, is one of the main characters in the epic tale of the *Ramayana*. He kidnapped Sita, Rama's wife, and most of the tale is devoted to the long fight

between him and Rama (No. 23). To free Sita, who was held prisoner in Lanka, Rama, helped by his brother Lakshmana and their army of monkeys and bears, took up arms against Ravana, the leader of the giants and the *rakshasa* (demons).

#### N° 6 Krishna as a child stealing butter

Inscriptions on the back: 'Way in which pagan women make butter. A Brahmin takes a / piece and gives it to a passer-by as alms.'

Inventory: 794.1.581-15

A young Krishna, with a dark complexion (traditionally blue), one hand deep in a large butter churn, turns towards his brother Balarama to give him a piece of butter. The scene is framed on the right by a banana tree in flower and on the left by a *gopi* (shepherd) at the door, who is pulling the cords to churn the butter. This is a famous episode from Krishna's childhood in the village of Gopula, where he got up to much mischief.

#### N° 7 Raja

Inscriptions on the back: 'Roudra one of the three great divinities of the pagans and the most / formidable because they believe that he presides over the / death of men, animals, and generally over the / destruction of all things'; and in Devanagari: '76 / ra'

Inventory: 794.1.581-18
Contrary to the text on the back, this is not Shiva (also called Rudra) but more likely a rain or

(also called Rudra), but more likely a *raja*, or sovereign, seated in front of his palace. He is leaning back against a large bolster (*gaddi*) covered in silver fabric and decorated with a motif of red flowers. He is wearing a golden, three-pointed crown (*mukuta*) and jewellery. Behind him, an assistant is waving a *chauri* (a yak-hair fly whisk), a mark of authority.

#### N° 8 Shiva and his shakti

Inscriptions on the back: 'Bischou this divinity is regarded by the pagans as one / of the main ones and they believe that she can bring them / honour and wealth'; and in Devanagari: 'cisuna'

Inventory: 794.1.581-19

A couple is seated on a low throne or *pitha* in front of a palace. We can recognise the figure of Shiva in the *yogi* seated in the lotus position with the piled hair of an ascetic (*jata*). On his right shoulder he is wearing the sacred thread (*yajnopavita*) and in his hand he is holding a

rudraksha-mala, or prayer necklace of achene seeds. Seated behind him is the goddess Parvati, his consort.

#### N° 9 Shiva and Parvati on Mount Kailasha

Inscription on the back: 'Mahadou praying to the goddess Parabatty makes / the river Ganges flow out of his head'

Inventory: 794.1.581-<sup>20</sup>

Shiva is on Mount Kailash, his residence in the Himalayas, and is seated on a tiger skin. He has a grey complexion as his face is coated in ash (vibhuti), and his hair is piled on his head (jata) like an ascetic, as a sign of detachment. On his forehead he has a third eye, a symbol of the destroying fire and his supreme wisdom, while a crescent moon placed in front of his face symbolises the cycle of time. He is wearing a necklace made of skulls and several snakes are coiled around his body as a sign of energy and immortality. Next to him are his traditional attributes, a trident (trishula) to which is attached a small drum in the shape of an hourglass (damaru), which provides the rhythm to his dance. The Ganges flows out of his hair, falling from the mountain and irrigating the land. Opposite him, his consort, the goddess Parvati, 'daughter of the mountain', is standing with her hands placed together in the anjuli mudra, while the bull Nandi. Shiva's mount, is lying at his feet. It should be noted that the depiction of the Himalayas - a succession of pink and grey rocks superposed one above the other - acts as a far-off reminder of the painted rocks used in Persian miniatures to evoke mountains. The painter used this method in several miniatures in the album.

#### N° 10 Ganesha

Inscriptions on the back: 'Ganes divinity of the pagans that is depicted with an elephant head / he presides over strength and health' Inventory: 794.1.581-29

Ganesha is one of the most popular Hindu gods, invoked on many occasions as he brings luck and helps overcome the obstacles that life may bring. He is the son of Shiva and Parvati, and legend has it that he was decapitated by Shiva in a fit of anger, and his head replaced by the first being that passed by. Here, he has four arms and is three-quarters seated on a large lotus flower (padmasana) placed on a mat. His elephant

head, in left-facing profile, is crowned with a three-pointed *mukata*, and a red scarf (*dupatta*) flutters on his naked chest. He is wearing jewellery. He is clothed in a saffron-coloured loincloth held up by a red sash (*patka*). One of his hands is holding a goad (*hankusha*) for guidance, another a sword, and a third, a dish piled with semolina balls in sugar syrup (*laddu*), which he adores. With his last hand, he offers a *laddu* to his mount (*vahana*), the rat (*mushaka*). This god is venerated by almost all Hindus, both by followers of Shiva and of Vishnu, because he represents peace and prosperity. In southern India he is often called Pillaiyar (youth). He is also known as Ganapati (lord of the *gana*) or Vinayaka (leader).

#### N° 11 Kârttikeya

Inscriptions on the back: 'Kartik this god presides over the fertility / or fecundity of women and those who / do not have children make sacrifices / to his idol in order to have them'; and in Devanagari: 'Pharataph'

Inventory: 794.1.581-30

Kartikeya, astride his *vahana*, a serpent-killing peacock, is represented as a young man and also bears the name Kaumara, the adolescent. He is in profile, facing to the left, in a landscape with a few trees and a chain of stylised mountains in the foreground. The son of Shiva, he is the god of war and leader of the army of the gods. Kartikeya is generally depicted carrying weapons, but when he has the name Skanda (or Shanmukha), he has six heads and twelve arms. His consort, Kaumara, is also depicted riding a peacock and is therefore sometimes mistaken for Sarasvati.

#### N° 12 Bhima

Inscriptions on the back: 'The giant Binsen half black, half white. He has as his / weapons a silver club that he is holding with one hand and an / elephant that he uses as a shield in the other'; and in Devanagari: 'Bhimasena' Inventory: 794.1.581-31

The giant Bhima (the Formidable), second of the five Pandava brothers and son of Vayu (the wind) and Kunti, Pandu's wife, plays a prominent role in the epic tale of the *Mahabharata*. His body is in two colours, one half light and the other dark, because he was hit by a thunderbolt (*vajra*). Here, depicted in a landscape in a heroic pose, in left-facing profile, he seems to be crossing a chain of mountains with long strides. His right

arm is equipped with a club, while the left, also raised, is holding an elephant that he is using as a shield. This rare scene is also depicted in a *Razmnama* painting, a Persian translation of the *Mahabharata*, where Bhima is fighting against the army of Karna, one of the Kaurava.<sup>4</sup>

#### N° 13 An ascetic and his disciple

Inscription on the back: 'Bairou formidable divinity of the pagans that by sounding / a trumpet spreads a multitude of ills across the earth'

Inventory: 794.1.581-32

In front of a small pavilion with a domed roof (chhatri), an ascetic with curly hair is seated in the lotus position and playing a kind of horn. The sect mark (namam) painted on his forehead indicates his affiliation to Vishnuism. His disciple (chela) is kneeling before him, his hands placed together in the anjali mudra sign of respect. In the distance, to the right, there is another building amid rocks and trees. Like several other miniatures in this group, which comes from the isolated region of Bihar, the subject remains quite enigmatic.

### N° 14 Yogini or female ascetic

Inscriptions on the back: 'The goddess Talanery is one of the seven sisters that presides over the / rains, flooding, and illness. The pagans say / that below the belt she is a dragon. This is why / they hide half of her body with a large piece of material'; and in Devanagari: 'sari' Inventory: 794.1.581-33

The inscription on the back of this page barely helps; it can be noted, though, that there is a village in Karnataka called Talanery. This woman, dressed in an orange tunic and wearing jewellery, would appear to be a rich Indian lady who has left the world for life as a hermit and ascetic. Standing against the backdrop of a landscape, she is resting her arms on a swing hanging between the branches of a tree. This position, which helps meditation as it allows the person to remain standing, is used by *yoginis* but generally the view is lateral.<sup>5</sup>

- **3** DALLAPICCOLA, 2010, p. 122, no. 8.3.
- **4** DAS, 2005, pp. 118-119, no. 46.
- 5. G, 2003, pp. 118 173, no. 16.
   HUREL, 2010, p. 118, cat. 184-4; YORK LEACH, 1995, vol. II, p. 676, no. 6.277; DIAMOND, 2013, p. 220, fig. 18f.

Small bells are affixed to the cords, thus setting

a monotonous tempo for the slight swinging

motion. A fly-whisk made of peacock feathers

# SERIES OF THREE VAIRAGI OR BEGGARS BELONGING TO A HINDU SECT OF VISHNU ASCETICS

India, Bihar, Patna, ca. 1730; gouache enhanced with gold and silver, 26 x 20 cm (paper), 21 x 15 cm (image).

#### Bibliography

ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 229–230, no. 714-1-3; ANDRÉ, 1876, pp. 398–399, no. 1422-1-3.

#### N° 15 Vairagi akasmukhi

Inscription on the back: 'A pagan penitent who made a vow to remain s[eated] / his whole life with his face held up to the sky, id. pagan' Inventory: 794.1.582-1

In the centre, a sannyasi (one who is in the life stage of renunciation) or a beggar follower of Vishnuism (vairagi), his naked body coated with ashes, is seated on a tiger skin with his legs crossed and a crutch (zafar takieh) under his left armpit holding him in this position. This is an akasmukhi, who keeps his face held up to the sky and remains in the position until the contracted muscles of the neck atrophy and become permanently rigid and the head becomes immobilised. His beard and hair are long, and his long nails, which he has never cut, are digging into the flesh of his palms. He is surrounded by two young disciples (chela) who are standing in front of aedicules and each blowing into a conch shell (shankha).

#### N° 16 Vairagi ardha-urddhvabahu (FIG.172)

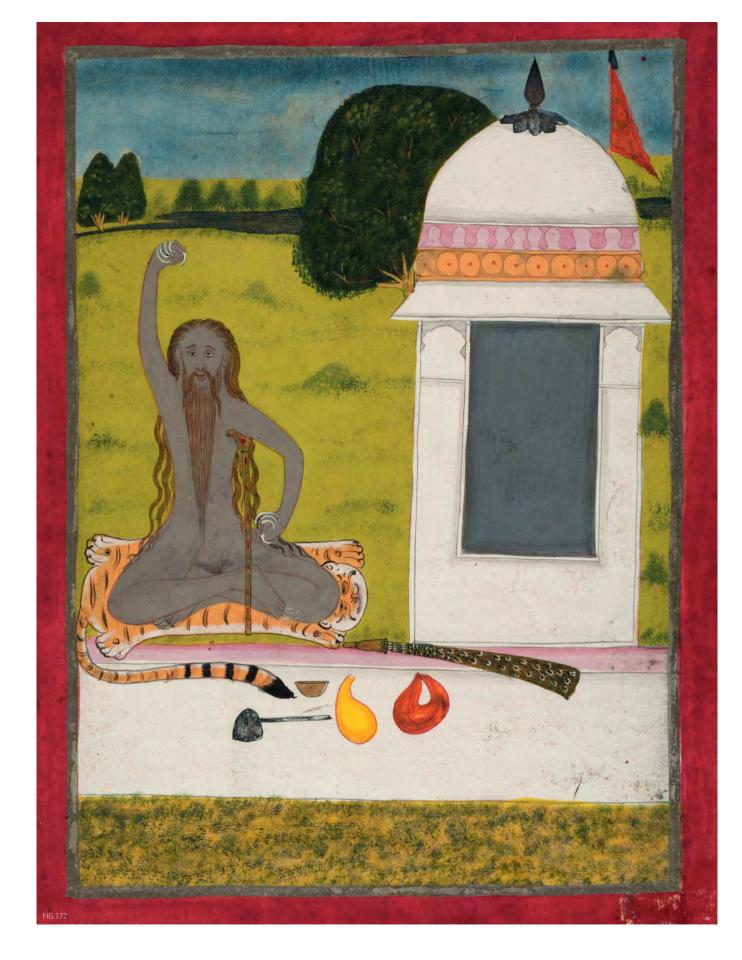
Inscription on the back: 'A penitent who has made a vow to spend his whole life seated and / with his arms raised. A pagan religion, they are called Monte or fakir in the / Bengali language, which means entirely naked' Inventory: 794.1.582-2

A sannyasi sadhu in the ardha-urddhvabahu pose, which translates as 'half' for ardha, 'raised' for urddhva, and 'arm' for bahu. This beggar or vairagi is naked, sitting on a tiger skin with legs crossed looking directly forward. His right arm is raised and the other is resting on a zafar takieh tucked under the armpit. His whole body is grey as it is coated in ash. His long hair and beard have never been cut. Due to the extreme and definitive mortification of the flesh that he has subjected himself to for many years, his raised arm has atrophied and can no longer move, and his continually clenched fists are perforated by his long, curved fingernails. There is a small temple to the right and a few objects lying on the ground; a fly-whisk, a bundle of belongings, a gourd, a ladle (sruk), and a small bowl for alms, his only means of subsistence.

### N° 17 Vairagi urddhvabahu

Inscription on the back: 'A pagan penitent who made a vow to remained sea[ted] / his whole life with two arms raised in the air. id. pagan' Inventory: 794.1.582-3

A *urddhvabahu* sadhu seated on an antelope skin, whose two arms are raised and whose naked body is coated in ash. The composition of this miniature is practically identical to the previous one, except for the form of the austere torment of this ascetic *yogi*, whose arms are permanently raised; *urdhva* meaning 'raised' and *bahu* 'arms'.



VISHNU

SERIES DEPICTING THE TEN PRINCIPAL

AVATARS (OR DASHAVATARA) OF THE GOD

The incarnations of Vishnu, known as avatara or 'descents', are innumerable, but ten main ones are recognised. In this series, Kurma, Vishnu's second incarnation in the form of a tortoise, is missing. However, with the presence of Balarama, the series may be considered as complete. Parashurama (No. 22) and Ramachandra (No. 23) already exist in this group. With the addition of Balarama in the form of Haladhara, this brings the number of representations of this god to three. Nevertheless, variations in the list of Dashavatara are not rare, especially in the case of provincial works. If we count the first miniature in the album, Balarama at rest next to the serpent Ananta (FIG.171), there are four images of the same god in this collection. This could indicate a personal devotion for this divinity on the part of the painter or the person who commissioned the works. However, in an agricultural region such as Bihar, this god of strength, water, and earth could also and understandably have been particularly venerated.

#### N° 18 Matsva avatara

Inscription on the back: 'Machautai having known that a deutta, after having stolen the / four books of law of the pagans had hidden in a pond / entered the body of a fish and having discovered the deutta / killed it and returned the books to the Brahmins'

Inventory: 794.1.581-6

Matsya is Vishnu's first incarnation, in the form of a fish. The god half emerges from a fish that is upright on the water, holding his attributes: a conch shell (shankha), a lotus (padma), a discus (chakra), and a large sword. He has decapitated the daitya Hayagriva, who had stolen the Vedas while Brahma was sleeping and hidden at the bottom of the ocean. The four Vedas, or sacred texts (Rigvega, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda), are depicted twice, once in the form of books (ole) placed on the grass, but they are also personified by the four Brahmins at the water's edge, who are giving the anjali mudra gesture, denoting deep gratitude.

#### N° 19 Varaha avatara

Inscription on the back: 'Brahautar represented with a rhinoceros head / is the preserver of pagodas. He killed a deutta who / had profaned those of Broumha and Bishou' Inventory: 794.1.581-7

Vishnu's third incarnation is Varaha, in the form of a boar. Like the previous avatar, it is connected to the story of the deluge. Varaha is seated on a lotus (padmasana), and his light-complexioned body is topped with the dark head of a boar wearing a golden crown (mukuta). He has four arms and is holding his traditional, symbolic attributes: the lotus for creation, the conch shell for space, the sword for power, and the discus for protection. Varaha went in search of Bhudevi, the goddess of the Earth, who was at the bottom of the ocean, held captive by the daitya Hiranyaksha. After having killed the demon, he raised up the Earth with his tusks, returning it to its rightful place. The Earth is in the form of a mountain with several temples. To the left, the gods Brahma and Shiva thank Varaha for his

#### N° 20 Narasimha avatara

Inscription on the back: 'The God Narsin that the pagans represent with a / dragon's head. He is famous for having killed the fakir Pallar who / only invoked the god Ram and wanted to abolish the cult of the / other divinities' Inventory: 794.1.581-8

Narasimha avatara is the fourth incarnation of Vishnu, in the form of a man-lion. His white body, clothed in a yellow dhoti, is that of a man with a lion's head and four arms. Hiranyakashipu, the king of the demons (asura) and personification of ignorance, hated Vishnu and tormented his son Prahlada, who was one of Vishnu's disciples. In his anger, he asked his son to tell him where Vishnu was. Prahlada replied that he could be everywhere and in everything. even a pillar. Hiranyakashipu then struck a pillar (stauna), which split in two, freeing Narasimha who disembowelled him as a punishment. To the left, Prahlada, whose hands are placed together in the anjali mudra gesture, averts his face from the horrific scene.

#### N° 21 Vamana avatara

Inscription on the back: 'The Raia Babalam famous for his charity gave water / to the deubta Bahou disguised as a Brahmin' Inventory: 794 1 581-9

This is the first act of Vishnu's fifth incarnation, in the form of Vamana, the dwarf Brahmin with blue skin. He is holding a parasol (chhattra), a sign of power, and is welcomed by the powerful king Bali, who pours him some water. The king is standing in front of his palace with his wife and a servant holding a vak-hair fly-whisk (chauri), a royal symbol. Vamana asks Bali to give him the amount of land that he can cover in three paces, in order to build a hut. Once Bali agrees, the second act of the episode shows Vamana growing into the huge form of Trivikrama. His first stride covers the whole earth, the second the heavens, and on the third, he places his foot on Bali's head, pushing him down into the netherworld where he becomes its ruler

#### N° 22 Parashurama avatara

Inscription on the back: 'The giant Pasarabaam who has an infinite number of arms and the ability / for his limbs to grow back as they are cut off, killed / landagan's father, who was a famous fakir turned / deubta who had received the gift of invulnerability. They fought / each time they met but with no advantage on one / side or the other because one could not be injured and the other / grew back new limbs to replace / those he lost'

Inventory: 794.1.581-10

Parashurama, Vishnu's sixth avatara, is fighting against King Kartavirya, sovereign of the Haihaya. He is armed with an axe (parashu) and a bow, and is carrying a guiver and a sword at his side. He is wearing a pink dhoti, a mukuta on his head, and has paduka on his feet. King Kartavirya, against whom he is fighting, is sitting on a pitha and his thousand arms wield sabres and katar. With his axe. Parashurama has already cut off many of his limbs, which are on the ground, just like Jamadagni, his father, whom Kartavirya had killed because he had stolen the cow Kamadhenu, born from the churning of the sea of milk, who brings abundance and the miraculous power to satisfy all wishes. She is seen fleeing into the hills, followed by a heifer.

#### N° 23 Rama purna avatara

Inscription on the back: 'Ram receives tribute from the deubta monkeys. He has with / him Latchemau his brother, the goddess Citta his wife and the / deubta Jamontry his principal minister'

Inventory: 794.1.581-11

Charming Rama, or Ramachandra, is the seventh avatara of Vishnu. He is the eponymous hero of the Ramayana, the great epic tale written by the sage Valmiki, and embodies perfection and rectitude. In front of a palace, Rama and his wife Sita are sitting on a great throne and leaning back against large cushions (qadi). A parasol, a royal symbol, is above Rama, who, with his hair pulled up into a bun and a crescent moon in front of his forehead, is holding a bow and is also armed with a guiver, a sword, and a trident. He is sitting in the royal ease pose (latitasana) and the monkey Hanuman is prostrate before him in a sign of veneration. Rama is surrounded by Jambava, the king of the bears, and monkeys, whose respective armies helped him to free his wife Sita and battle against the demon-king Rayana and his horde of rakshasa. His brothers (Lakshmana standing behind the throne, Bharata and Shatrughna in the centre) are reunited for this triumph; all three are holding *chauri*, a royal symbol. This incarnation, during which the hero lives an entirely human life, is known as a purna

#### N° 24 Krishna purna avatara

Inscription on the back: 'The god Kischou and the goddess Ragika his wife who is / rubbing his feet'

Inventory: 794.1.581-16

Like Rama, Krishna, the eighth avatara, is considered by Vaishnavas to be one of Vishnu's total incarnations (purna avatara). The other avatara are only partial manifestations and are called anshavatara. Krishna, the 'Lord of the night complexion' (usually painted blue), is on a throne or pitha, installed in front of a pavilion. His wife Radha is sitting on the ground next to him massaging his foot, and a servant is bringing a collation on a platter. Krishna has a halo and his hair is styled in an unusual way, decorated with peacock feathers. He is wearing his traditional yellow dhoti. Krishna, one of the most popular deities in India, is revered and adulated by most Hindus. His whole life, from his childhood to his death, is punctuated with innumerable episodes

and recounted in many texts, notably in the Gita Govinda, a long poem full of charming moments and fanciful situations, and the Sur Sagar, which tells of the god's early childhood and the mischief he got up to. Other representations of this subject exist, where, on the contrary, Krishna is at the feet of Radha, seeking forgiveness for some injury he has caused.6

#### N° 25 Balarama avatara (FIG.173)

Inscriptions on the back: 'Aldal who presides over the course of the Ganges digs the / riverbed'; as well as a light-red drawing of a

Inventory: 794.1.581-14

Balarama, in the form of Haladhara (or Halayudha), is armed with a ploughshare (hala), with which he deviates the course of the Yamuna River. Dressed in a yellow dhoti, he is holding the long handle of the hala in both hands. On his feet he is wearing paduka, just like Krishna, who is following him accompanied by Radha. The two brothers have three-pointed crowns on their heads. The river runs at their feet, and a little shepherdess (*qopi*) is watching the scene. One hot day, while on an outing in the region of Vraia, his childhood village, Balarama, Krishna's elder brother, decided he wanted to bathe in the Yamuna. As the river was far away, he ordered it to come to him. But when it didn't obey, Balarama stuck his ploughshare into the bank in a fit of rage and brought the river to him, forcing it to leave its usual course and go where he ordered

#### N° 26 Buddha avatara (FIG.174)

Inscription on the back: 'Vichnou one of the pagans' three main divinities / he presides over the preservation of all things'

Inventory: 794.1.581-5

Buddha avatara, Vishnu's ninth incarnation, is sitting on a large lotus (padmasana), in the centre of a small temple surmounted by three cupolas. In each hand he is holding a lotus flower. He is surrounded by two orants, to the left by a woman kneeling with her hands in the anjali mudra gesture, in a respectful posture, and on the right by a disciple, also kneeling, who is holding a lotus flower (padma). Buddha is dressed in a yellow dhoti and is wearing a scarf (dupatta) on his shoulders. One of the characteristics of Hinduism is its ability to integrate and adapt foreign elements. Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha born in Nepal, spread his doctrine into India in around the fifth century BC, and it gradually spread from Southeast Asia toward China and Japan. Today in India, Buddhism has practically disappeared, but by descending to Earth in the form of Buddha, Vishnu was able to pick up his teachings and bring back unto him the heretics who had followed his schismatic doctrine.

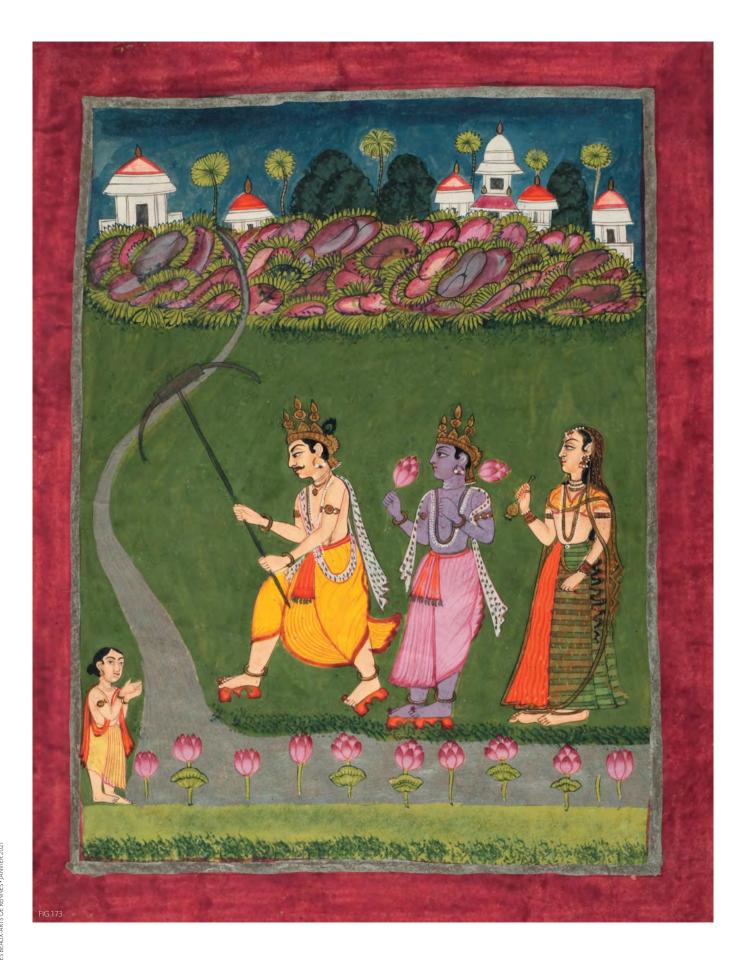
#### N° 27 Kalki

Inscription on the back: 'Kalamky the other divinity that must destroy the universe / when the time comes with a flaming sabre that he / holds in his hand and when his horse places its right foot / that it has in the air onto the ground the world will be ruined' Inventory: 794.1.581-17

Kalki avatara, the tenth and final incarnation of Vishnu, has not yet descended to Earth. He will arrive at the end of the Kali Yuaa, the age of conflicts, the current period and the last of the four eras of the world, or Yuga. When Kalki appears with his white horse, this will mean the annihilation of this world and a new cycle will begin. An apocalyptic god, Kalki is seated on a lotus (padmasana) placed on a low throne, or pitha, and is leaning back against a large cushion. He is wearing a yellow jama knotted with a golden sash (patka) and has a three-pointed crown on his head. His magnificently attired white horse is next to him. In his right hand Kalki is holding up a large sabre edged with sparks, in silver (here it is oxidised), in front of a horned. orange-coloured demon (raksasha). At the end of this current era, he will punish the wicked and destroy the world, and out of the ruins will emerge a new form of humanity, a golden age (Krita Yuga), and the cycle of the four Yuga will begin once again (Krita, Treta, Dvapara, and Kali) for millions of years.

6 See, for example, LAL, 1982, pp. 60-63, pls VI and V.









#### SERIES OF SEVEN MOTHERS OR SAPTAMATRIKA

India, Bihar, Patna, ca. 1730; gouache enhanced with gold and silver, 26 x 20 cm (paper), 21 x 15 cm (image).

#### **Bibliography**

ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 224-226, nos. 713-21-23, 25-28; ANDRÉ, 1876, pp. 391-394, nos. 1421-21-23, 25-28,

Devi is the generic name for designating a female divinity, or any goddess, but most especially the cosmic energy of the god Shiva, called Mahadevi or the Great Goddess, his shakti, source of everything and origin of the world. Each goddess, or *Devi*, is generally the wife of a god and is considered as his *shakti*, especially in the Shivaite tradition, which worships them fervently. They can have multiple facets and have many names. such as Parvati and Gauri, which are benevolent, or Durga (No. 31) and Kali (No. 34) who represent the terrible and destructive sides of the Devi. There are as many forms of the goddess as there are gods. Here, this series of seven Devi inevitably makes us think of the Divine Mothers or Seven Mothers (saptamatrika), most often represented in bas-reliefs or sculptures in temples, personifying universal energy. There can be eight of them (ashtamatrika) or even more, up to sixty-four. Here, their attributes do not allow us to identify them with certitude. As with all of the miniatures in this album, from Patna in Bihar, these are works for the masses and reflect local traditions and beliefs. By forming a series of saptamatrika, this group, with its inexact mythology, instead represents a group of mothers (matrigana), partly matrika and yakshi at the same time, that is, folkloric semi-goddesses who are more or less malevolent, closely associated with the destroyer god Kumara (No. 11), the son of Shiva. Venerated in villages, these divinities in the form of a beautiful woman or mother haunted the forests and were feared, as they could be harmful and abduct children, but they could also be protective.

#### N° 28 Manasha

Inscriptions on the back: 'Babany': and in Devanagari: 'Ydu [...] plasara' or 'Prushaman' or 'Plushaman'

### Inventory: 794.1.581-21

This pretty young woman is probably a depiction of Manasha, the goddess of serpents and Shesha's sister. She is kneeling next to a mountain that has a temple decorated with a red banner at its summit. Both of her arms are wrapped with a cobra, while a third sits atop her head with its hood open. In her right hand, she is holding a dish containing four human heads and seems to be drinking the blood from them. This Hindu divinity was invoked in order to protect oneself from snake bites, as she had the ability to counter the fatal effect of their venom. A rural goddess, she was primarily venerated in Bengal, in the north and northeast of India by indigenous populations. In the Brahmanic context, she can sometimes be identified as the goddess Kadru, who created serpents.

#### N° 29 Brahmani

Inscriptions on the back: 'The goddess Deby one of the seven sisters who presides over the rains / flooding and illness'; and in Devanagari:

#### Inventory: 794.1.581-22

This is probably the Brahmani Devi, Brahma's shakti, one of the seven traditional saptamatrikas. She has four arms and two of her hands are holding her usual attributes, a noose (pasha) and a lotus (padma); a third is brandishing a sword and the final a dish with two human heads. She is kneeling on a mountain with a dome-roofed building (chhatri) on top. Standing in front of the Devi, a Brahmin dressed in a yellow dhoti is paying tribute to her, his hands in a gesture of respect (anjali mudra).

#### N° 30 Svaha

Inscription on the back: 'Babany one of the seven sister goddesses who presides over the rains / flooding, and illness. She is portrayed swallowing / souls depicted as human heads' Inventory: 794.1.581-23

The divinity, sitting cross-legged on a large lotus (padmasana), is sheltering in a small temple with red banners. She is holding a dish with three human heads in her right hand and a lotus flower in her left. The presence of a ram at her side could identify this goddess as the shakti of

the god of fire. This is because the ram is the mount (vahana) of Agni, one of the five elements and guardian of the Southeast (one of the eight ashtadikpala, or directions). His consort is the goddess Svaha, who, in this series of mothers or matrika, is one of the aspects of Devi.

#### N° 31 Durga

Inscription on the back: 'The goddess Babany Dourga one of the seven sisters who presides over the / rains, flooding, and illness. She is portrayed / swallowing souls depicted as human heads'

#### Inventory: 794.1.581-25

Durga, the terrible shakti of Shiva, is astride her mount (vahana), a lion, here in the form of a white, winged chimaera whose tail ends in a red flame. In her eight arms she is carrying swords, katar, a trident (trishula), and a discus, as well as a dish with three human heads. She is thus armed to kill asura or demons. She is standing with a crescent moon in front of her face, while a crow (kaka), a bird of ill omen associated with the soul of a departed one, seems to melt out of the sky.

### N° 32 Mahishasuramardini (FIG.175)

Inscriptions on the back: 'The goddess Dourna having been insulted by the deutta Maikassour / follows him upon a dragon and having recognised that he was / hidden in the body of a buffalo, forces him to come out by / cutting the head of this animal and despite its opposition chains it / with garter snakes that she uses as a tie'; and in Devanagari: 'Maidhasura' Inventory: 794.1.581-26

Identical to the previous representation, the goddess Durga/Chamunda, destroyer of Mahisha, the buffalo demon asura, appears in the form of Mahishasuramardini. This episode of the Devi Mahatmya, a Sanskrit text in praise of Devi, illustrates her final combat against the daitya Mahishasura. A pious worshipper of Brahma, he had received the gift of invincibility. Equipped with this and his army of demons, he attacked the gods and chased them from the heavens. The gods appealed to the Great Goddess for help, who focused her energies (shakti) and borrowed weapons from each of the gods. Astride her vahana and with her hands holding many weapons, she destroyed the asura and, in a final duel, confronted Mahisha. She cut off his buffalo head, and as seen in this painting, while he was

#### N° 33 Ambika

Inscription on the back: 'The goddess Badany Mamaya one of the seven sisters who / presides over the rains, flooding and illness / she is represented swallowing souls depicted as human / heads'

#### Inventory: 794.1.581-27

In front of a temple, seated on a low throne or pitha covered with a large lotus (padmasana), this Devi is probably Ambika, another form of Parvati/Durga, Shiva's shakti. Her eight arms carry various weapons - a trident (trishula), three sabres (shamsher), a rondache (dhal), two katar, and a quiver. Above her crown (mukuta), a snake stands upright, and she is holding a dish with four human heads. She is framed by two shakta devotees who are praying (puja), practising the cult of shakti or supreme goddess.

#### N° 34 Maha Kali

Inscription on the back: 'Babany Kalika one of the seven sister goddesses who presides / over the flooding of rivers, rains, and illness / She is represented swallowing human heads that depict souls'

#### Inventory: 794.1.581-28

This seventh matrika, with a dark complexion, is Kali the Destroyer, often represented in a much more terrifying form. Her name comes from the Sanskrit word kala (time), the one that destroys everything, and from which she derives this power. In front of a temple, sitting with her legs crossed on a pitha, leaning against a large cushion (gadi), she has four arms and is holding a discus, a lotus, and a dish with three human heads. These decapitated heads remind the living that nothing can escape the omnipotence of time. Kali/Parvati, Shiva's shakti, can also take on many other aspects, and here we can recognise Jyeshtha or even Kaushiki.

#### TWO MINIATURES FROM BENGAL

India, Bengal, ca. 1730; gouache on European

#### **Bibliography**

ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 220 and 225, nos. 713-12, 24; ANDRÉ, 1876, pp. 387 and 392, nos. 1421-

#### N° 35 Hanuman

Sheet: 25.3 x 19 cm; image: 12.2 x 7.9 cm Inventory: 794.1.581-12.

In the epic tale of the Ramayana, Hanuman is the leader of the army of monkeys. Jambavan, the king of bears, had asked Hanuman to go to the Himalayas and look for the four medicinal plants that would cure the warriors. Here, Hanuman, after having torn off a section of the Oshadhiparvata mountain on which herbs capable of curing the wounded Raghava grow, triumphantly brings a piece back.

#### N° 36 Bhadrakali

Sheet: 25 x 18.8 cm; image: 12.5 x 8.3 cm Inventory: 794.1.581-24

This Devi, which has eight arms and a third eye, is Bhadrakali, Shiva's shaktri. She is sitting on a large lotus and is sheltered under a parasol (chhattra), a symbol of power. Around her neck, she is wearing a necklace made of seeds (akshamala), and she is armed with a sword, a club (gada), a trident (trishula), and is holding a human skull

#### **SERIES OF FOUR MUGHAL SCENES**

India, Bengal, Mughal provincial style, ca. 1700-1710; gouache on European paper.

#### **Bibliography**

ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 231, no. 715-1-4; ANDRÉ. 1876, pp. 399-400, no. 1423-1-4.

## N° 37 A dignitary and his follower

Sheet: 25.5 x 18.4 cm; image: 13.9 x 8.6 cm Inventory: 794.1.583-1

Seated on the terrace of a palace, a Muslim lord dressed in a tunic (jama) with a floral motif receives a garland of jasmine flowers that a young woman kneeling in front of him is holding out. She is wearing a red choli and a green sari.

#### N° 38 Young woman smoking a huqqa

Sheet: 24.5 x 18.4 cm; image: 12.5 x 8.8 cm Inventory: 794.1.583-2

On the terrace of a palace, a young woman comfortably leaning against a large gaddi is smoking a hugga.

#### N° 39 Two young women

Sheet: 24.8 x 18.2 cm; image: 15.4 x 10.5 cm Inventory: 794.1.583-3

Two miniatures are presented within the same frame. On the left, a young woman and her child are playing with a yoyo. On the right, a female musician is holding a string instrument, a kind of lute or tambura.

#### N° 40 Princess and her follower

Sheet: 25.5 x 17.9 cm; image: 12 x 8.3 cm Inventory: 794.1.583-4

An elegant princess is sitting on a square pitha and holding a parrot in her right hand. Standing behind her, her female companion is brushing her long hair.



#### N° 41 Muhammad Shah

India, Bengal, Murshidabad, ca. 1745; gouache enhanced with gold and silver, 26 x 17.8 cm (paper), 21 x 13.5 cm (image); (794.1.584).

#### **Bibliography**

ANDRÉ, 1868, pp. 231-233, no. 716; ANDRÉ, 1876, pp. 400-402, no. 1425; FRÈCHES, 1974, pp. 40-41 and fig. 2; PERRIOT, 1987, p. 287. The emperor Muhammad Shah (1702-1748), with a halo, is sitting on a silver throne topped by a parasol (chhattra, a royal symbol), installed on a terrace beyond which flowering cypress and laurel trees can be seen. He is sheltered from the sun by a large canopy (pandal) and is dressed in a jama closed with a patka, which holds a long katar, a typically Indian weapon. He is wearing several items of jewellery and a golden turban; his gloved right hand is holding up a falcon while with the other he is smoking a hugga, which is on a small, silver low table (chowki). Two servants are standing behind the emperor with fly-whisks (morchhal), while in front of him, a minister (which could be his vizir Qamar ud-din Khan) is reading a message. Abul-Muzaffar Nasir ud-Din, born in 1702, acceded to the throne at the age of seventeen and reigned under the name Muhammad Shah from 1719 to 1748. His nickname was Rangila (lover of pleasures). It was during his long reign that the decline of the Mughal Empire began to accelerate after the Sack of Dehli in 1739 by the Persian Nadir Shah (1688-1747).

#### **SERIES OF SEVEN DECCAN MINIATURES**

India, Deccan, Golconda, ca. 1675-1680 ( $585-^{1}$ ) and 1700-1710 ( $585-^{2}$  à  $-^{7}$ ); gouache enhanced with gold and silver,  $25.5 \times 18.5$  cm (paper).

# N° 42 Shah Raju and Abul Hasan Qutb Shah (FIG.176)

Image: 16.2 x 16.7 cm Inventory: 794.1.585-1

## Bibliography

ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 233, nos. 717-1; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 402, nos. 1426-1; PERRIOT, 1987, p. 380, fig. 1.

There are many miniatures of the sultan of Golconda, Abul Hasan Qutb Shah (1600–1699, reign 1672–1686) and his Sufi master Shah Raju from the Qadiriyya brotherhood still in existence. But this particular example is finely crafted and probably dates from before the fall of the kingdom of Golconda in 1687. Defeated by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, Abul Hasan was imprisoned in the Daulatabad Fort until his death in 1699.

### N° 43 Jahângîr

Image: 15.2 x 9.8 cm Inventory: 794.1.585-<sup>2</sup>

#### **Bibliography**

ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 233, nos. 717-2; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 402, nos. 1426-2; PERRIOT, 1987, p. 386, fig. 15.

Salim Nur ud-Din Muhammad, Emperor Jahangir (1569, reign 1605–1627), eldest son of Akbar (1542–1605), has a halo and is dressed in a green *jama* knotted with a golden sash (*patka*) and armed with a long Deccan sword (*khanda*). This mediocre portrait of Jahangir is one of the many copies made after the fall of the sultanates of Deccan. Artists, who no longer had any royal commissions, mass-produced these series of dynastic portraits designed for a European clientele who were interested in Indian history. These albums were widely circulated in Europe.

#### N° 44 Shivaji

Image: 19.3 x 12.8 cm Inventory: 794.1.585-<sup>3</sup>

#### **Bibliography**

ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 233, nos. 717-3; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 402, nos. 1426-3; PERRIOT, 1987, p. 385.

This is a traditional representation of the great leader Shivaji (1627–1680) of the Bhonsle Maratha clan, born near Puna. This legendary warrior was the liberator of the Maratha nation. He is traditionally depicted armed with a pata, a long sword that has an iron gauntlet protecting the wrist and forearm, and another straight sword (khanda) characteristic of the Deccan; a katar is held in place by his belt. As a remarkable strategist and chief of a mountain tribe in the hinterland, he fought his whole life to re-establish Hindu power against the Muslim kingdoms and the Mughal Empire. He expanded the Maratha Empire as far as Madras.

#### N° 45 Dara Shikoh

Image: 17.5 x 11.8 cm Inventory: 794.1.585-5

#### **Bibliography**

ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 233, nos. 717-5; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 402, nos. 1426-5.

There is a strong resemblance between certain members of the imperial family. However, we can recognise here Prince Dara Shikoh (1615-1659), the eldest son of Emperor Shah Jahan (1592-1666) and Mumtaz Mahal (1593-1631), and brother of Aurangzeb (1618-1707). These Golconda portraits have been copied and recopied, and there is no certitude as to the accuracy of the facial features; all that remain are attitudes and details in clothing that are imprecisely reproduced. Dara Shikoh is traditionally depicted with his arms outstretched, hands together as in a gesture of prayer. He is clothed in a red paijama covered with an embroidered muslin jama, tied with a golden sash (patka) that is decorated and bedecked with flowers, and is wearing golden slippers. His long pearl necklaces, spinel-ruby drop earrings, and *bazuband* (bracelet worn on the upper arm), as well as his turban adorned with a black egret, indicate that he is a prince from the imperial family. An aesthete and mystic, he wished, like his ancestor Akbar, to bring together Muslims and Hindus. As the favoured son, Dara Shikoh was his father's preferred successor, but he was defeated by Aurangzeb at Samurgarth, made prisoner, paraded on a donkey, and executed in 1659, after his sons had been killed before him.

#### N° 46 Abul Hasan Qutb Shah

Image: 13.3 x 9.1 cm Inventory: 794.1.585-4

#### **Bibliography**

ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 233, nos. 717-4; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 402, nos. 1426-4; PERRIOT, 1987, p. 382, fig. 3.

Sultan Abul Hasan Qutb Shah, the eighth and final sovereign of the Qutb Shahi dynasty in the kingdom of Golconda, reigned from 1672 to 1687. He was also nicknamed Tana Shah (king of [good] taste), and appears here in his later years, with an imposing stature, sumptuously dressed in a *jama* closed with a belt. The belt-buckle is set with a large ruby surrounded by pearls. He is also wearing a tunic edged with a fur collar, and a dark blue-and-gold striped wrap is around his shoulders. His turban is topped with an egret and decorated with pearls. He is holding a long sword (*khanda*) from the Deccan. Tana Shah was a poet, aesthete, scholar, and music enthusiast who presided over a court no less refined.

#### N° 47 Mir Jumlah

Image: 17.2 x 11.3 cm Inventory: 794.1.585-6

#### **Bibliography**

ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 233, nos. 717-6; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 402, nos. 1426-6; PERRIOT, 1987, p. 383, fig. 8.

Muhammad Said Mir Jumlah (1591–1672), also known as Sayyid Muzaffar, was a diamond merchant. In his *Voyages*, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–1698) referred to him as 'Mirgimola'.<sup>8</sup> Before entering public life as prime minister for Abdullah Qutb Shah, the sultan of Golconda, he controlled diamond mines, from whence he acquired his power and a huge fortune. After the defeat of his sovereign, he went into the service of Aurangzeb (1618–1707) as viceroy of Karnataka, later becoming governor of Bengal from 1660 to 1664. He died in the Deccan, at over eighty years of age, of dysentery contracted during a campaign in Assam.

#### N° 48 Madanna

Image: 19.8 x 13 cm Inventory: 794.1.585-

#### **Bibliography**

ANDRÉ, 1868, p. 233, nos. 717-7; ANDRÉ, 1876, p. 402, nos. 1426-7; PERRIOT, 1987, p. 384, fig. 9.

In 1673, Madanna, a Brahmin of Telugu origin, became prime minister (*mir jumlah*) to the sultan of Golconda Abul Hasan Qutb Shah (1600–1699), who did not discriminate between his Muslim and Hindu subjects. In 1685, he was beheaded and thrown from the high walls of the fortress, after having had the hand of a *sayyid* cut off; his house was burnt down.

8 TAVERNIER, 1676

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, British Museum (1974,0617,0.4.3 and 1974,0617,0.2.17); Bibliothèque nationale de France, Manuscripts (Smith-Lesouëf 232 f. 4 and Smith-Lesouëf 233 f. 24) and Estampes (Od 32, f. 23).

# OCEANIA IN ROBIEN'S DAY



FIG.177 Melchisédec Thévenot, Relation de divers voyages curieux qui n'ont point esté publiées (sic)... Première partie, in Paris, Jacques Langlois, et al. ii, 1663, map of Nouvelle Hollande, last fol.; burin and etching, 38.5 x 54 cm; former collection of the Cistercians of Bégard, 1682, Robien's former library (no. 505 of the 1749 inventory), Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc (G730).

# THE 'ROBIEN CLUB' OF THE MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS DE RENNES: A 'HERCULEAN' HYPOTHESIS

ANTHONY MEYER

My thanks go to François Coulon of the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes, who enabled me to suggest this idea and who helped in my research, to Philippe Peltier of the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac who indicated the existence of the clubs of Oslo and Bremen to me, as well as to the individuals and institutions who permitted me to use the images illustrating this article: Philippe Bohuon and Destination Rennes -Office de Tourisme, Loïc Vinet and his blog Deepdelver.

#### **CLUB OR NATURALIA FIG.179**

#### Restoration

Atelier régional de restauration de Kerguéhennec, Bignan, 2010

#### **Observations**

Anthony Meyer, gallerist, 2015; Jeremy Coote, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, 2014 (unspecified); Egel Knol, Groninger Museum, Groninge, 2014 (unspecified); Bas Nederveen, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 2014 (unspecified); Pieter Baas, Erik Smets, and Jan Wieringa, Naturalis nationale kennisinstituut over biodiversiteit. Leyden, 2014 (xanthoxylum); Koos Van Brakel, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, 2014 (Oceania?); Julien Volper, Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, Tervuren, Belgium, 2014 (Caribbean?); Pierre-André Loizeau, Conservatoire et Jardin botaniques de la ville de Genève, 2014 (xanthoxylum, Brazil or Madagascar); Roberta Colombo Dougoud, Musée d'ethnographie de Genève, 2014 (non-Oceanic); Henry Petitjean Roget, Conservation des musées de la Guadeloupe, 2013 (West Indies?); Jean-Michel Chazine and Jean Guiart, CNRS, Tahiti, 2013 (Irian Jaya, Papua, Indonesia?); Dewi Herawati, Indonesian Heritage Society, Jakarta, Java, 2009 ('Traditional club of Kalimantan, for beating mattresses'); Arne Aleksej Perminow, Oslo Universitetets Etnografisk Museum, 2009 (Fiji?); David Van Duuren, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, 2001 (Fiji or Tonga?); Élise Patole Edoumba, Muséum d'histoire naturelle de La Rochelle, 2000 (Oceania?); Philippe Peltier, Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, 1999 (Southeast Asia or Oceania?); Eric Demerger, botanist, La Varenne Saint-Hilaire, 1999 (xanthoxylum); Kathleen Bickford Berzock, Art Institute of Chicago, 1998 (unspecified); Daniel Lévine, Musée de l'Homme, 1998 (unspecified).

None of the Indonesian museums have answered our requests for information to date.

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#### **Exhibition**

Never exhibited

During my visits to museums or collectors' homes, as a specialist of Oceanic art, but above all with a reputation as an art lover and even perhaps 'expert' in hatchets and war-clubs from the Pacific, I am very often shown weapons that others were unable to identify.

Most of the time, these 'aberrant' pieces are indicated as being Oceanic and sometimes quite specifically as coming from Fiji, Tonga, or Samoa

Some of these clubs, hatchets, or sticks closely resemble the renowned Fijian war-club known as dromudromu - a wooden club with a head shaped from the natural bulb of a tree root, often reworked to form blocks, rough patches, ergots, or aggressive points. Others are simply Tuareg tent pegs. Sometimes, they are Nilotic clubs from Sudan or hatchets or knobkerrie from Zulu and Xhosa populations from South Africa, not forgetting the carpet- or washing-beaters of all kinds and all origins. There are also the cane-clubs of Scottish or Irish Highlanders, and (why not?) Basque or Sardinian shepherd's sticks; and then among the tribal populations from the area stretching from Turkey as far as China, we find various sticks with engraved designs sometimes reminiscent to the neophyte of the work on Polynesian clubs. Finally, there are the clubs that I cannot identify myself.

Among this vast, dispersed, and diverse collection of poorly identified clubs, there is a little series of very special 'hatchets', whose shape and material have always intrigued me - par-

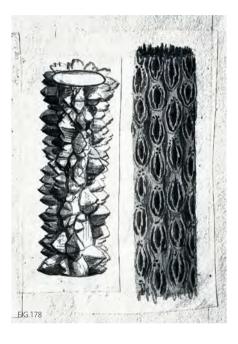


FIG.178 Drawing taken from Robien's manuscript Description historique de son cabinet, ca. 1740, pl. 29; the Robien Collection, Bibliothèque des Champs Libres Rennes (MS 0546)

FIG.179 Club or naturalia, Southeast Asia, Borneo (?), colonial period, 17–18th century; natural wood crudely squared at the base, presenting thorny bark 95.5 x 9 cm; the Robien Collection, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes (794.1.773).



ticularly the 'Robien club' of the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes.

They are made up of long, more or less cylindrical wooden sections, visibly hewn either from large branches or directly from small trunks, and covered with spines, spikes, or natural (or otherwise) ergots. Their dimensions vary between sixty to one-hundred-and-twenty centimetres long. Their handle is often sculpted, or at least diminished, in order to remove ergots and form a grip.

The 'Robien club' is cut from Zanthoxylum simulans wood (Sichuan pepper tree), a tree originating in Asia (Japan, China, Korea), or from the Zanthoxylum clava-herculis (Southern prickly ash) of North America and the Caribbean. It is a tree of the Rutaceae family whose bark is prickled with protuberances that grow randomly and whose appearance is visually very aggressive.

These two species were imported into Europe: possibly in Marco Polo's day (1254–1324) at the time of the opening of the spice route for the Asian species, and well after 1492 for the American species.

The 'Robien club' of the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes stems from the collection of the *président à mortier* of the Parliament of Brittany, Christophe-Paul de Robien (1698–1756), a nobleman, naturalist, and great collector, in possession of a remarkable cabinet of curiosities. The club is represented in Robien's handwritten inventory that, unfortunately, only shows a section of the object, drawn in the volume dedicated to natural history.

It later reappeared during the revolutionary confiscation of 1794 then again in the 1850 inventory by Hyacinthe Pontallié (1796–1851). 'No. 503 club made of wood bristling with natural corky asperities – rather well conserved.' Then in 1868 it was identified as possibly African by the museum's curator, Auguste André (1804–1878), who notes '948 B Africa?', and from this date until at least 1932, it was considered to have originated from the Slave Coast (Benin, Togo, and Nigeria).

In order to correctly situate the fabrication of this club within a historical, geographical, and cultural context, we must go back to Robien's day, who died in 1756. The potential provenances are thus Oceania, Africa (including Madagascar), the Americas, Asia, and Europe.

We are certain that the 'Robien club' dates from at least prior to his death, at which time Oceania

was little known to Europe. Oceania had nevertheless already been 'discovered' and the Pacific Ocean was thus named by Magellan in 1520. The Spaniards Alvaro de Mendaña (1542-1595) and Pedro Fernandez de Queiros (1565-1614), on two journeys, explored the Solomon Islands, the Marguesas Islands, and Vanuatu between 1568 and 1595: the Dutch navigators Willem Schouten (1567-1625) and lacob Lemaire (1585–1616) crossed the Pacific Ocean between 1616 and 1617, and Jacob Roggeveen (1659-1729) landed on Easter Island in 1722. Nevertheless, it was not until 1771; and the return of the first voyage of English captain James Cook (1728-1779) that the first objects were brought back in large numbers and Polynesian clubs became readily accessible. The history of exploration of the Pacific by Westerners thus seems to contradict the presence of Oceanic clubs in the West prior to 1771.

Having eliminated Oceania as a probable source, as well as Africa and Madagascar, for typological reasons, and especially since this wood species did not grow there, all that remains are Asia, the Americas, and Europe. It is of course possible that the club, owing to its wood, xanthoxylum, came from Asia or even the Americas or the Caribbean, but in that case, from which region, era, and culture? Neither Asia nor the Americas are known to have provided this kind of weapon during this period.

All that remains now is Europe, and it was precisely while standing before an ancient sculpture of Hercules that I one day had a revelation. In classical statuary, Hercules is presented with his club; then later, in medieval and Renaissance art, we observe a resurgence of its representation.

Hercules, the son of Jupiter and Alcmene, is always shown with his attributes: the club and the hide of the Nemean Lion. For over two thousand years, Hercules was a recurrent and popular hero, played at the theatre, paraded in street shows, and sculpted and painted by the greatest artists.

So, what if these strange clubs, like Robien's one, were in fact 'Herculean Clubs'? Furthermore, in the United States, *Zanthoxylum clava-herculis* assumes the premonitory name of 'Hercules' Club tree'.

The birth of cabinets of curiosities, or *Kunstkammern*, at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Northern Europe increased the demand for curiosities tenfold. Among these

FIG.180 Club, known as the 'South Seas Club', early 20th century; zanthoxylum wood, 58 x 4.5 cm; former collection of Adrian Jacobsen (1853–1947) donated in 1908, University and Cultural History Museum, Oslo (UEM19914-20184).

**FIG.181** After François Gilet (active in Rennes in the late 17th century), *La Justice et La Force*, copy of the original door of the Parliament of Brittany that was destroyed in the fire of 1994; sculpted wood, 128 x 82 cm (cartouche, including frame); Palace of the Parliament of Brittany, Rennes.

bewildering objects, there were nails having served at the crucifixion of Christ or birds of Paradise – 'paradise' since they were exported from New Guinea via Southeast Asia without their feet, thus giving the impression of being obliged to fly endlessly, like angels – without forgetting the unicorn horn, which is none other than the narwhal's tusk, and many other natural objects or artificial (manmade) curiosities. So why not Hercules' Club?

The 'Robien club' at the Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes could be a perfect example of a Hercules' club made for the market of cabinets of curiosities.

I list three other clubs of the same typology: in Saint-Malo (Tour Solidor, D.M. II 118), Saint-Germain-en-Laye (Musée d'Archéologie nationale, 84.532), Oslo (Universitetets Etnografisk Museum), and possibly a fourth in the collections of the Übersee-Museum in Bremen, Germany, which would make five in total to date. It appears that a small industry came about in order to create the 'Hercules' Clubs' and assuage the curiosity needs of nobles and bourgeois, insatiable for novelties to add to their 'cabinets of marvels' but the potential existence of these workshops remains to be discovered.

It would be interesting to date the wood through the 'carbon 14' method, in order to have confir-



mation of the date of death of the tree, which could help us to better situate the fabrication of these four or five clubs within a timeline.

It must be added that the 'Hercules' Club', as a symbol and object, has a well-catalogued existence, even since the Iron Age. Pendants in the form of clubs, sculpted from bone and dating from the biblical era, have been found in Palestine. The Romans (first to third century AD) made regular use of them on their coins track! and small amulets, and bronze, gold, bone, and wooden scythes exist that represent a Hercules' Club. Later, between the fifth and seventh centuries, during Germanic migrations, the form of this amulet known as the Hercules' Club rapidly spread throughout Europe. The amulets, worn as ear or belt ornaments, seem to be discovered - a strange but otherwise interesting fact - only in the sepulchres of women of this era.

Let us note in conclusion that the sculpture by François Gillet, active in Rennes in the seventeenth century, of the monumental door to the lobby of the Parliament of Brittany, an establishment permanently frequented by Robien, represents on the left Justice, bearing scales, and on the right Power, armed with a club of the Herculean variety. Similarly, a sculpture of considerable dimensions, again by Gillet, and representing once again Power armed with a club adorned by vines and foliage, is also found in the lobby. Beyond this proximity with the par-

liamentarian, there is naturally no clear connection between Robien and the representation of the club in these two fine sculptures from the latter third of the seventeenth century.

I have no proof of my theory as to the identification of the Robien Club and its transformation into a Hercules' Club... but, like a detective in a *roman noir*, I firmly believe I am on the right track!



### Following pages

FIG.182 Jean Jansson, Novus Atlas sive Theatrum orbis terranum in quo Hispaniae, Italiae, Asiae, Africae nec-non Americae, tabulae & descriptiones luculentissima, vol. III, detail of the map Descriptio freti Magellanici et freti le Maire, Amsterdam, 1647; burin, 40.7 x 52.5 cm (unframed); former collection of the Bibliothèque Saint Michel d'Anvers, 1650; Robien's former library (no. 1650 from the 1749 inventory), Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc (Rés G71³).

<sup>1</sup> ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 1, pl. 29, between p. 101 v. and 102 r.



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FIG.183 Canes or reeds, Robien's manuscript Description historique de son cabinet, ca. 1740, p. 90 vo.; Bibliothèque des Champs Libres, Rennes (MS 0546).

The term 'Robien Collection' should be understood in the broad sense of a familial collection: the blue vases from China were in all likelihood already at the family residence when Anonyme de Robien, belatedly baptised Christophe-Paul, started his collection, doubtless from the 1720s onwards, but also because various objects came after the 1760s (see François Coulon, In Praise of the Curious, pp. 118-133). While Christophe-Paul thus constituted the better part of this 'cabinet of curiosities', as his contemporaries described it, when the collections were seized during the Revolution, it was in fact a family collection. We could always immerse ourselves in the few uncertainties of origins that these other great Rennes families evoke, since they had to botanize a few curious items in the exchanges in the eighteenth century and that could have been attached to the Robien endowment in 1794 (such as the Magons in Saint Malo<sup>1</sup>), but also religious orders such as the Ursulines in Rennes ('a marten skin in the form of a shell filled with musk seeds' among the eighteenth-century Ursulines2). Nothing could allow us to forget the immense and above all coherent forest of the Rennes cabinet, within the context of a local decorative aridity that was almost ascetic by comparison with the Robien mansion (the spartan aspect of the 10 series Procès-verbaux d'expertises et de ventes then C Supplément au fonds d'intendance, correspondance générale, at the Ille-et-Vilaine Departmental Archives, was no more than a challenging lesson in ornamental frugality, even if Gauthier Aubert, despite this dryness, challenges the term 'Rennais desert').

The imprecision of titles rendered the attempt at a synoptic table of objects confusing and risky, and they also only function for a handful among them. This is why I have chosen to reproduce here the archival documents that cite what can be ascertained as the list of exotic objects from the Robien family collection, with its inevitable uncertainties. Better than a long speech, the revolutionary investigation establishes in the most concise way its *status quaestionis*: 'Investigation into the museum I-1 Did a former public cabinet of natural history exist? No, the one that currently exists and that the public enjoys already derives from the cabinet of the *Émigré* Robien and from what the curator added to it [...] I-5 ii Who is its curator? P. Queru Lacoste [...] III-2 Did he take care to comply with the instruction of 15 Messidor, Year 2? Very precisely [...] IV-6 Finally, how many foreign objects are there? Approximately 200.'3

#### Manuscript of President Robien: 4

[At 3rd §] 'After having described the various monuments of the religion and cult of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans that we conserve in this cabinet, I believe I ought to describe the ones that we were able to assemble from the cult and religion of the peoples of the two Indias. These vast countries that for so many centuries have remained in the shadows of the idolatry that was transferred and perpetuated among one party, since the most ancient times, and passed to the other party in the regions where they now live and according to a timeline of transmigration of which we are still uncertain. These vast countries have cooperatively shared various cults for a long time, whose subjects are the most bizarre of divinities and to which they attribute very singular and very distinct origins. The Orientals, especially those of Hindustan, have a multitude of gods, despite the fact that they only acknowledge a universal principle of all things that they call by different names, according to the various castres, or sects, and the various cantons. In Bengal, from whence I derived the curious books, and the figures of all of their different divinities, they call this principle Casta, Parabaram, or Parbaram, whom they regard as the creator of all things. These peoples and their Brahmen who are their priests recount that after having formed the universe, Casta created three people who have his own substance, and gave each of them their different role and withdrew into the Mameron Paroudam, which is a great silver rock situated in the middle of the universe where, without any precaution, he rests between the folds of a thousand-headed viper, and that is how they represent him, surrounded by a great circle of human heads that represent the souls of the fortunate.

*Bruma, Berma,* or *Broumba,* as per the different pronounciations, and the different *castres* or cantons, is regarded by the heathen and particularly by those of the sect, as the first divinity created by Casta. They represent him with four heads and four arms and say that he presides over the birth and the creation of all things.

They say that Vichenou, Vishnu, Jagrenat is the second of these divinities, and nevertheless the one whose cult is the most extensive. They attribute to him the provision of honours, wealth, and the conservation of all things both that have occurred and will occur. They represent him sitting very ordinarily, with his legs folded, a crown on his head and two flowers in his hands. Formerly with four arms and often standing, as we can see in no. [...], and as he was once adulated in Mahé and salvaged from the time this fort was conquered, hence this statue made of heavy stone, blackened by the smoke of incense. He is represented with his head in a kind of very tall bonnet, crowned with circles, pearls, and precious stones, with the neck, arms, chest, body, and legs adorned with bracelets and necklaces, one of his hands placed at his hip, the other holding something round, and the two others raised, each holding a flower. This divinity is also often represented in a monstrous form, just like his brother Bruma herein described, since they are represented with a formless head, a triangular face, big wide eyes, the latter with a red face, lagrenat with a black face, and each of them endowed with two arms or arm stumps whose extremities are painted red. The rest ends in a pedestal that was of yellow colour. It was in this way that the domestic gods of these peoples were sent to me from Bengal, and so is also represented the goddess Soubodora, one of the seven sisters presiding over wounds and excesses, and one of lagrenat's wives, whose face is slightly rounder than that of the former two brothers

The third, named *Roudra*, *Roudre*, *Rutren*, or *Rougnat*, is the most formidable of the heathen gods. He presides over the death and destruction of all of the creatures that *Bruma* brings into being. He is represented, now seated with legs crossed as in the book painted in Patna that represents all of these divinities, now standing and of a colour tending towards green or dark grey. This is the case in the small domestic idol that I obtained from Bengal, where his head wears a crown, with his right hand leaning on some kind of monkey that is kissing his feet, his shoulder bearing a quiver, with a bow held in his left hand.

These three primitive divinities to which the others appear subordinate – or rather which are the symbols or the various figures under which the idolatrous claim they were metamorphosised – are infinitely revered by these peoples.

They attribute, among others to Vichenou or Jagrenat, nine or ten different incarnations or metamorphoses. The first, under the name of Machantar or Martia, assumed fish form to seek in the depths of a swamp the four books of law where a Deupla who had stolen them had hidden them. The second as a tortoise to support the world, and they unleash upon this tortoise incarnation an infinite number of fantasies. The third as a pig, others say a rhinoceros, to dig the earth in search of the feet of Rutren, who had hidden them there. The fourth under the name of Narsing, with half the body of a man, half lion. He killed the fakir Pallar who criticised the gods. The fifth as a gnome or fakir to surprise Babalam or Marbilé, king of Madura, who was charitable to the fakirs and who he swallowed up underground and from whence he returns every year on certain days. The sixth as Ramen or Rama to deliver the earth from evil rajas and other tyrants. The seventh, Brama once again, to exterminate a giant named Cartavarry who had a thousand arms. The eighth again in the figure of Ramen to destroy the giants Rouenen, Canbacaren, and Vibiehinen who had abducted his wife Sita, whom he recovered thanks to the help of some monkeys. The ninth in the figure of Crisnen (meaning black man) to destroy Cupreven who was an evil king. The last metamorphosis shall take the form of a winged white horse, which, when it will set its right foot on earth, will destroy the universe.

All of these different incarnations or metamorphoses and all of the various interpretations and explanations that the various castres and nations apply to them have thus scrambled the mythology of their gods, of which they have multiplied the amount to the point that certain cantons count them in the amount of three hundred and thirty millions gods. One of their main divinities is the god Mahadev, which several confuse with Ixora, whom they regard as the primary principle or the seed of the world that they represent in some cantons in the form of a column resembling a shimmering cone, fading upwards from its base to its tip. But in Bengal, from whence came the small domestic idol of earth, it is represented in the same way as in the book of the gods of India painted in Patna, in the form of a half-naked man with a crown on his head adorned with necklaces and bracelets, astride or next to a bull or a white cow, wrapped in or seated on a leopard or tiger skin, with both hands raised holding something aloft. The Indians of Bengal consider him and call him the god of the Ganges, and claim that this river emerged from his mind in prayer to the goddess Paravaty, and that another god named Aldal dug the bed of this river over the course of which he presides. They give to Mahadev the goddess Dourga as a wife and they represent her with a human head, eight arms in which she holds various weapons, and in one, a vase full of souls figured by human heads. She has on her crown a kind of parasol and sits astride a dragon that they sometimes call Chinqué, which they claim devoured Osour Raja. According to them, Durga is one of the seven sisters of Vichenou who presides over wounds and excesses.

I do not really know what is the role of the god *Quichen*, or *Quichou*, nor that of his wife *Rada* or *Garika*, who, in the book of the gods rubs his feet, and in the domestic idol, simply stands beside him, arms raised.

As for the god *Ganes*, who is the same as *Pellayar*, son of *Ixora*, he is too remarkable to be forgotten in this catalogue, owing to his large bare belly and his elephant's head, which he retained from the metamorphosis of his father and mother into this animal when they conceived him. He has four arms. He holds in one hand a kind of saucer full of *plettes* (?) that he presents to a rat, and in the other a disk, in the third a baton, and in the fourth some kind of spoon. This god is considered the strongest of the heathens' gods. They claim that he supports the world on his head, and that he presides over strength and health.

The last figure remaining to describe is *Linguan*, who is a very obscene character. They claim that *Rutren*, after cutting off the fifth head of *Bruma*, withdrew in penitence with the *Brâmes* and after violating their wives, they cursed his members, which fell and caused such a blaze that if *Bruma* had not transformed himself into a pedestal and *Vichenou* into something else to receive them, the universe would have been consumed. And it is these three divinities that they claim are represented by these three different parts brought together.

These believers have several more gods whose figures can be seen in the book of portraits that were sent to me from Bengal, and the stories in a manuscript

**4** ROBIEN, 1740, vol. 2, p. 17 r° and 22 r°. The manuscript is faithfully retranscribed [in the French and respected in the translation, with allowances for English grammar].

<sup>1</sup> AD 35 4Bx 770, cited by Gauthier Aubert in AUBERT, 2001 a, note 20, p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> POCQUET, 1916, p. 105.

**<sup>3</sup>** AD 35 L. 966, 1790–1800.

Those from China that are the subject of the cult of the lower classes are no less numerous; but the little trade that we have in the lands and the respect that these believers confer to them mean that we have few genuine articles. I have only collected the goddess *Pousa*, who is alabaster, seated with legs folded, in a sopha; holding a kind of chapelet in her hand, and another figure in the same material, also seated on a sopha, with a very broad face, a very fat stomach, who is said to be the god of pleasures of the flesh!

Before taking leave of China, I must not forget a significant series of figures in coloured clay, extremely well sculpted, representing various characters, old men, women, children, mandarins, dancers, and artisans. But the finest pieces are their mechanical works, among others a wind-up silver horseman and an ivory galley, and the famous Tower of Nanjing, measuring over three feet tall, made of pearl and glass, and countless other items, from their clothing and everyday furniture, to urns of all sizes and porcelains of all kinds, both ancient and modern.

After the description of the gods and works by the peoples of the Orient, a word must be said about those of the West, starting with those that we first encountered; I am referring to the savages of the American isles. I will describe here several figures of *Zemi* or *Mabouya*, earthenware idols, or the kinds of hideous heads that these barbaric peoples adulate. Some are hollow, others solid, but all so poorly formed that it is difficult to identify what they represent. The god *Pet* heretofore described [in the Egyptian section – editor's note] is not to be confused with these *Zemi*. Along with these idols came what resemble cups formed by a fruit, which were used in their sacrifices.

I believe I must here describe a kind of double bottle that came from Peru, brought back by Frézier who describes it in the account of his journey in Peru. These two bottles that were found in an Incan tomb are made of brown clay baked in the sun. They are joined at the base by an interconnected channel and at the top by a large flat band. The orifice of one of these bottles is broad and edged on the exterior. The second hole is covered by a plate crowned by the figure of a small animal eating a pod, but whose stomach is pierced opposite a hole in the plate, through which the air contained in the neck of this bottle when compressed by the water that is introduced by the interconnected channel from the other bottle, forms a rather loud and high-pitched sound that imitates more or less animated cries, depending on whether the bottle is tipped quickly or slowly on its side. This vase is highly unique; we do not know its purpose, but we believe that it served in the cult of their false divinities.

We also see a wooden idol covered in silver crowned with several stars, crescents, and a sun, made of poor gold, which, it is said, was once adored by the Mexicans. This idol, standing approximately a foot tall, is of such poor construction that it is quite difficult to represent it by description: which is why I refer the reader to the figure that I have had drawn, that will more aptly convey at a glance than any two-page description.

I could include after these gods the various works of art and industry of these various peoples of America: but although luxury and good taste have not set foot there, we at least recognise their great skill particularly in their various works of embroidery of feathers, porcupine quills, their various baskets, caps, feathered ornaments, boats, and countless other works.

For the Africans, except their fetishes, which were for most the first object that they encountered, we have few of their divinities. Their handicrafts are hardly more numerous nor more worthy of our attention. Their idleness does not allow them to deploy their industry, if only for a few hats woven from bulrushes, or a few loincloths made of grasses or *eptes*; and it is still only the women who bother while the husband smokes or rests, or else is occupied in abducting some of his neighbours to exchange them with Europeans for a few utensils, or the eau-de-vie they prize highly; it is also the only currency that they use, except for cowry shells, or small *trivia monacha*, since they neglect entirely this purpose for the gold they have in abundance, except as barter [...].'

#### Revolutionary record of 11 June 1794: 5

Department of Ille et Vilaine, District of Rennes, Antiques, Donation of Robien Émigré, inventory on the locations filed at the Directoire du District on the 29 Prairial, second year of the French Republic.

[...] Cabinet 21 no. 73: mortar in Chinese copper, 2 inches 6 lines high, Diameter 4 inches, pestle in ordinary yellow copper.

no. 74: Chinese copper vase with its openworked lid and a movable handle, 2 inches 11 lines high, 4 inches 1 line wide, and 4 inches 9 lines long.

[...] Cabinet 19 no. 15: Vichenou with 4 arms in solid and blackened granite, two feet one inch high, from Mahé after this fort was conquered; with on its head a very high cap crowned with a circle and precious stones figured in relief, with the neck, arms, chest, body, and legs adorned with bracelets and necklaces, the right hand resting on the side of the other holding a ball, the two others holding flowers that join behind it.

No. 16: figure in poorly fired clay representing *Bruma*, a Penate from Bengal, 5 inches high, formless head, triangular face, big wide painted eyes, red face, two arm stumps whose extremities are painted red, the rest culminating in a nedestal

No. 17: Goddess Rebora

No. 18: Goddess Roudra

No. 19: Guichen and Rada together

No. 20: The God *Ganes* with his elephant head and 4 arms, all from Bengal, slightly mutilated. These are the Penates of the location.

No. 21: 2 figures representing dogs, 2 inches 11 lines long, from Bengal.

Cabinet 20, no. 22: Goddess *Pouza* figure in albaster with friezes, legs folded on a sopha holding a kind of rosary in the hand, 4 inches 3 lines high.

No. 23: Another figure in the same material, less tall, on a sopha, with a broad and laughing face, a fat stomach, and legs folded.

No. 24: A large series of figures in coloured clay and other materials, representing various characters from India and China. In poor condition.

No. 24X: The figure of the Tower of Nanking, standing three feet high, in pearl and glass. In poor condition.

No. 25: 9 major porcelain vases from Japan in the form of urns with their lids. The largest measure three feet tall, the smallest 18 inches.

No. 25X: 6 other vases of different shapes - 1 less large.

No. 26: 2 brown earthenware bottles from Peru found in an Incan tomb joined at the base by an interconnected channel and at the top by a wide, flat band. The orifice of one of these bottles is wide and rimmed on the exterior, the other is covered by a plate crowned by the figure of a small animal resembling a monkey, eating a pod, but whose stomach is pierced. When these bottles are filled, depending on how the bottle is tipped, a rather loud and high-pitched sound results.

No. 27: Idol figure in the worst of taste, it is no more than a piece of wood standing one foot tall, covered in very thin slats of poor silver adorned with a few stars, crescents, and suns in poor gold, the whole idol barely representing a male figure.

[...] No. 34: A scroll made of palm tree leaves, marked with a seal, on which Arabic lettering is inscribed.

No. 35: Figure in terracotta varnished green, representing a Chinaman seated, one leg crossed and passed under the other, leaning on the left knee, naked to the waist, wearing a necklace and bracelet of rings, standing nine inches high (it is a *bonze* or Buddhist priest).

**5** AN, fonds F 17, 1270a (Marichal file). The manuscript is faithfully retranscribed.

[...] No. 43: 2 goblets in turned wood from China, very light, 4 inches 3 lines high, 2 inches 7 lines in diameter, the stem and handles made of very thin silver.

No. 44: 1 Sea monster made of Chinese soapstone measuring 11 inches 10 lines long, 7 inches 2 lines wide, 7 lines thick, suspended in the middle of a wooden base, similar to those found in Chinese paintings. The base 20 inches tall, 2 feet wide is used on the doors of some Chinese residences.

[...] No. 55: 2 jugs from Patna, 5 inches 2 lines in diameter, measuring 3 inches 5 lines.

No. 56: 1 other yellow clay jug, 10 inches in diameter.

No. 57: 1 clay Chinese pagoda, 13 inches 3 lines high, 7 inches 5 lines wide.

No. 58: 3 African vases in brown clay.

No. 59: 7 other small vases red on one side and white on the other in very light clay from India.

No. 60: 1 teapot in red clay from India with its openwork lid, 3 inches 6 lines high, 2 inches 8 lines in diameter.

No. 61: 1 brown clay teapot from India, 3 inches 6 lines high, 3 inches in diameter.

[...] Further contents of cabinets 21 and 22, no. 63: a man's shoe rounded at the end, 17 inches long, 6 inches wide, wooden heel 20 lines high; from China.

No. 64: Women's shoe with toe curled in satin, silk-embroidered ponceau in silk on the foot open at the back, without a heel, 5 % inches long, 12 % lines wide, from China.

[...] Clays, chalks, sands, salts, fossils, alabasters, and marbles - The clays:

Cabinet 2, 1st drawer, no. 8: Clay from India fashioned into small unfired bottles

[...] No. 11: 3 pipes from India in clay, 2 containing gold dust.

No. 12: 2 bowls and lid in grey clay from Patna.

No. 13: 4 bowls, small tray, frog, and small clay bottle from Patna.

[...] Chemicals, donation from Robien, Émigré [...] works of art:

No. 1: 3 octagonal porcelain vases, 2 feet 10 inches tall including the lid measuring 2 feet in diameter, 1 restored.

No. 2: 4 vases idem in round form, 2 feet 4 inches tall with their lid measuring 22 inches in diameter.

No. 3: 2 octagonal vases idem, 19 inches tall and 13 inches in diameter.

No. 4: 2 porcelain vases, blue with white background, in cylindrical form, 2 feet 4 inches tall, 14 inches in diameter, with long necks. 1 restored.

No. 5: 4 porcelain vases from Japan, 2 feet tall, rim splayed in the form of a watering jug, 2 smaller vases. These vases are recorded in the *Cahier des figures antiques* and their rightful place is herein.'

## Inventory of the Musée d'histoire naturelle, Ille et Vilaine departement, Antiques and Foreign Objects, 20 Prairial, Year 9. 6

First Room, Minerals [...], p. 12: in the middle of the room on a bench a pirogue from the Eskimos, rather well preserved, approximately 8 metres long.

Third Room, p. 16, ancient and foreign weaponry, various objects from India and China, placed in meshed cabinets presenting a surface of 16 metres in the following order:

[] Assegais:	2
Model of boats from the Labrador coast:	2
Club from Canada:	1
Indian daggers:	2
Shields idem:	2
Bows, quivers, and sets of arrows from India and from savages:	10
Savage's club:	1
Women's hats from India and China:	3
Fans and screens idem:	6
Chinese paintings, one painted on glass, 2 on fabric, and 3 on rice paper:	6
One tower in fine pearl made in China, model of that of Nanking, 1 ¼ metre high: very unusual	11
Chinese flute [mouth organ]:	1
Vases, magots, lures, pagoda and miscellaneous, all from China:	56
African fetishes:	2
Large vases, dishes, bowls in porcelain from China and ancient Japan:	15
(p. 17) Glass and clay both ancient and from Asia, Africa, and America: .	. 26

Fifth, p. 19 room of the same dimension as the previous one, it holds small antique statues and vases, idem, in glass cabinets [...]

p. 20 [] <i>Vichenou</i> with 4 arms, in very hard granite, 2 feet 1 inch, from Mahé:	1
Penates from Bengal:	

**6** AMR 5R11. The manuscript is faithfully retranscribed.

## Cabinets of Curiosity in France in the Mid-Eighteenth Century

- Less than 5 cabinets
- From 5 to 10 cabinets
- From 10 to 20 cabinets
- Over 50 cabinets

FIG.184 Hubert Jaillot, Atlas François contenant les cartes géographiques dans lesquelles sont très exactement remarquez les Empires, Monarchies, Royaumes et Isles de l'Europe, de l'Asie, de l'Afrique et de l'Amérique..., La France, Paris, chez Jaillot, 1700; burin and watercolour etching, 51.2 x 64.8 cm; Robien's former library (but not cited in Mainguy's revolutionary Confiscation of 1796), Bibliothèque municipale de Saint-Brieuc (Rés GG6).

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